

Union Profile

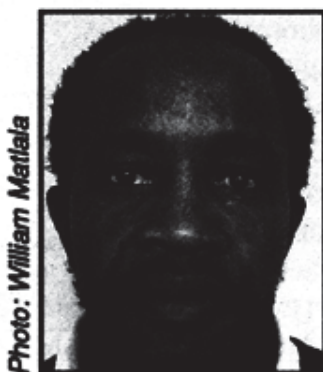


Photo: William Matlala

For eight years POTWA has waged militant struggles for union rights and recognition. Now it has won those. But

'commercialisation' poses new challenges. Can the union adapt?

SNUKI ZIKALALA asks the questions.

POTWA:

responding to **a changing sector**

Post and Telecommunications Workers Association (POTWA) scored an important economic victory this year.

The union, which organises engineers, technicians, diggers, counter clerks and postmen and women in the postal and telecommunication sector, got SAPOS and TELKOM managements to agree to a 19,8% increase – which is above the inflation rate.

POTWA, negotiating on wages for the first time with SAPOS and TELKOM, pushed the minimum wage beyond R1 000. For the lowest grades the increase means workers will earn a minimum of R1 020 and the majority will receive increases of between 10 and 11%.

According to POTWA president, Kgabisi Mosunkutu, the agreement was not the result of "a change of heart from the management. It is our strength and militancy that forced SAPOS and TELKOM to raise our wages above the inflation rate. With the wage talks out the way, the focus will now be on the immediate problems. We'll be fighting for full

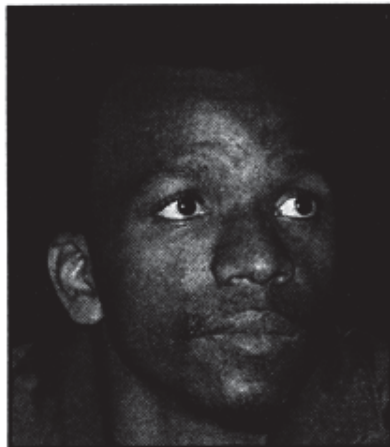
recognition and developing an infrastructure to cope with restructuring. We'll also resume unity talks with other associations for the establishment of a single union in this sector."

Since commercialisation came into effect in October last year, a number of structural changes have taken place. Post and Telecommunications were separated. An interim recognition agreement which embodies the Labour Relations Act (LRA) has been introduced.

At the same time POTWA, like other COSATU affiliates, is not without its internal problems.

Background

POTWA emerged out of the toothless Works Council in 1986. Poor conditions of employment and naked racism in the public sector had contributed to the rejection of the Works Council. Black representatives in the Works Council were always at a disadvantage and were expected to fulfil the interests of



Mlungisi Hlongwane, general secretary of POTWA

Photo: William Matlala

management. They initiated the formation of POTWA.

Hardly a year after its foundation, POTWA organised a major strike. Some 8 000 workers disrupted postal and telecommunication services for five weeks. The 1987 strike ended in

disaster with the dismissal of 2 800 workers, including leading shopstewards. Nearly all POTWA's structures were destroyed, but the real damage was the lowering of morale and weakening of the union.

Access to workers at the Post and Telecommunications premises became impossible. Coloured and Indian workers were employed to replace the victimised African workers. Those who survived were afraid of reprisals and were reluctant to be active within POTWA.

The following years were an uphill struggle. Rebuilding POTWA's structures and regaining workers' confidence in those difficult times was not easy. However, the union's membership increased from 10 000 in 1986 to 22 863 in 1992, with 673 shopstewards.

New leadership

Last year, POTWA's third national congress made sweeping changes to its leadership. Leading key figures were replaced by young, militant activists, the majority of whom were former telecommunication workers dismissed during the 1987 strike.

Kgabisi Mosunkutu was elected president and Velile Nkwanyana as vice president. Others to be elected were: Mlungisi Hlongwane (general secretary), Sizwe Matshikiza (assistant general secretary), Ramateu Manyokolo (treasurer), Bob Mabaso (education chair) and the late Floyd Mashele

(campaigns co-ordinator). The national organiser of the union, Shadrack Kiti, was appointed by the CEC.

Regions were restructured to fit in with COSATU's structures. POTWA now has regional offices in Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, Western Cape, Orange Free State, Transkei, Natal, Northern Transvaal and Witwatersrand.

Since then, the country has seen disciplined actions including pickets, lunch-hour demonstrations, go-slows and sit-ins. In May 1991, twelve postal and telecommunications depots in Natal and Witwatersrand were affected by sit-ins and mass demonstrations. Actions were also reported in Pretoria and the East Rand.

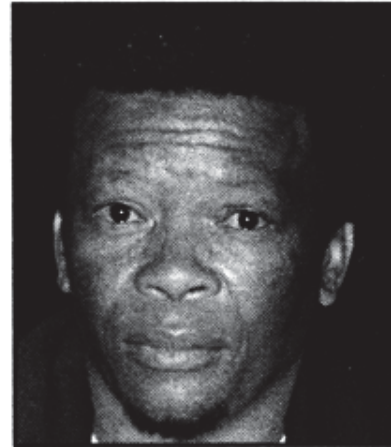
In Cape Town, the union's national co-ordinator, the late Floyd Mashele, led a 400-strong march to the central post office where a 14-day ultimatum was given to the Ministry of Public Enterprise and Economic Co-operation and to the Postmaster General.

These mass actions were precipitated by the post office's reducing the initial wage offer from R927,50 to R851,25. POTWA was also protesting against the Post Office Amendment Bill which was paving the way for privatisation of the sector.

POTWA vehemently opposes privatisation. According to the union, privatisation will result in workers losing their jobs. However, POTWA has been more accepting of commercialisation with the state being the only shareholder.

Separation of Posts and Telecommunications

Despite vigorous campaigning by POTWA, on 1 October 1991 the Department of Posts and



Kgabisi Mosunkutu, former general secretary, now president

Photo: William Matlala

Telecommunications was registered as two separate companies – the SA Post Office Limited (SAPOS) and TELKOM.

Previously, 96 000 workers in these sectors were excluded from the provisions of the LRA and were denied access to the Industrial Court. Workers were allowed to form staff associations and bargain at the Staff Relations Council around conditions of employment. However, there could be no serious wage negotiations as the budget presented in Parliament by the Minister of Posts and Communications had already allocated wages.

A positive feature of the commercialisation process is that now workers fall under the ambit of the LRA.

The new interim agreement which was signed last year, grants postal and telecommunications workers the right to an unprocedural strike for 72 hours without any intimidation or harassment from management. Unlike the LRA itself, it provides a peace clause which stipulates no action may be taken against workers who are on an illegal strike.

The interim recognition is a great victory for the workers, but is not a definitive victory.

The registration of TELKOM and SAPOS as two companies has changed the public sector. It has separated postal and telecommunications workers into two companies which are supposed to bargain separately.

According to POTWA general secretary, Mlungisi Hlongwane, the union has resisted attempts by TELKOM and SAPOS to negotiate with them as two separate companies. "During the recent wage negotiations we succeeded in bringing the two companies together. But representatives of SAPOS and TELKOM argued that their mandates and policies differ and the two companies are controlled by two separate boards of directors."

POTWA is under considerable pressure from the two companies. Negotiations and hearings are now dealt with in a professional manner. The work of shopstewards, who earlier on were representing both Postal and Telecommunication workers, will now have to

be restructured in accordance with the separation of the two companies.

POTWA's recognition and acceptance by the employers has institutionalised and professionalised the mode of conflict through collective bargaining. The militancy of the union's leadership may now conflict with the post-LRA pressures to restrain union members from engaging in unauthorised conflict activities.

A centralised bargaining forum

In the past, smaller staff associations in the post and telecommunication sector had a vote in the bargaining unit, regardless of membership. This gave them the right to veto any resolution despite their minimal representation.

POTWA, as the biggest union in this sector, is pushing for sufficient representivity as a prerequisite for inclusion in the bargaining unit. If this is accepted, it will drive the six racially divided associations towards the union.

One of the biggest problems facing POTWA is how to develop the unity of the staff associations and ultimately form one union.

Because of the legacy of apartheid, it is still difficult to involve the white staff associations, which have been part of management, in the radical politics of change and unity in this sector (see box on p 60).

The coloured and Indian staff associations are attempting to work more closely with POTWA, and a few white unskilled and semi-skilled workers have joined the union. Significant gains have been made in the postal section of Boksburg, which is known to be conservative.

One factor driving the South African Post and Telecommunications Employees Association (SAPTEA), representing Indian workers, and the Post Office Employees Association (PEASA), representing coloured workers, towards unity talks, is the fact that POTWA has succeeded in drawing a substantial number of coloured and Indian workers into its ranks.

In the Western Cape, about 2 400 coloured



White post office workers - a handful have joined POTWA, but post office unions are still mostly racially divided

Photo: William Matlala

Figures supplied by TELKOM and SAPOS on workers employed in their sectors

	TELKOM	SAPOS
Staff:	65 000	28 207
Staff associations		
<i>South African Telecommunication Association (SATA): represents predominately white technical staff</i>	14 000	
<i>Postal and Telkom Association (P&T): represents predominately white clerical and administrative staff</i>	3 295	8 744
<i>Post Office Employees Association of South Africa (PEASA): represents coloured workers employed as senior inspectors of uniformed staff and senior post deliverers</i>	5 320	2 025
<i>South African Post and Telecommunications Employees Association (SAPTEA): represents Indian workers in the clerical staff</i>	1 090	564
<i>Post and Telecommunications Workers Association (POTWA): represents predominately black workers employed as post deliverers, technicians and general labourers</i>	15 936	4 795

workers have joined POTWA.

Hlongwane attributes the inflow of other racial groups into POTWA to the relentless struggle the union has waged against the Patterson job evaluation system.

"The successful campaign against the grading system, which resulted in go-slows and other low level industrial actions for about a month last year, convinced the workers POTWA is the only union with their interests at heart," he says.

"It is not poaching, as some would say, but practical work and goods that we deliver that convinced workers."

Problems and prospects of unity

During negotiations for a wage increase that year, there were sit-ins and stoppages. SAPTEA and PEASA joined POTWA's initiative. For the first time the idea of a merger with the two unions was mooted.

Talks about mergers between POTWA, SAPTEA with 1 090 members and PEASA with 5 320 members – which were mothballed because of minor differences in the leadership

might resume soon.

On 18 July, PEASA initiated a preliminary meeting to discuss unity. According to PEASA's vice president Godfrey Wright, it was only SAPTEA and Postal and Telkom Association (P&T – predominately white) which attended. "We were quite disappointed POTWA did not respond to our invitation. However, the response was great and we laid down principles of unity and agreed to meet again on 17 October."

POTWA's president Mosunkutu shows certain misgivings about PEASA's initiative. In his words, "these associations – PEASA, SAPTEA and P & T – lack commitment. They are afraid they will be swallowed by POTWA."

A single union will benefit workers. Having a centralised bargaining forum, a single union would be in a position to negotiate wages, conditions of employment, health and safety, education and housing for all racial groups.

But at this crucial time of our struggle, one would have expected POTWA, not PEASA, to take the initiative and influence the decision making of these unity talks.

Is POTWA holding back because of its internal problems? Can it deliver the goods and will its well-tested leadership be able to take the necessary steps towards forming a single union?

Internal problems and POTWA's education programme

Because of violence, shopfloor structures are not functioning properly, locals are not well attended and service in the remote areas is poor. The union suffers from a shortage of skilled and professional people. POTWA's education department is still at its infancy. According to education officer, Bob Mabaso, the union is still developing its policy on training.

With the increasing sophistication of industrial relations, POTWA has taken the question of training and retraining seriously. According to a POTWA official, the union is insisting that training of new recruits should address the long-term perspective of affirmative action. "The administration,



Building one post office union: will POTWA rise to the challenge?

Photo: William Matlala

finance and security departments, which are the privilege of white workers at the moment, should be opened for blacks. Blacks should receive equal training with their white colleagues."

It is also fighting racial discrimination in the two sectors. Mabaso says there are black graduates whose knowledge and qualifications are not being utilised. "Presently, there is only one black person in the C3 level. Whites who have no matric certificates dominate the managerial posts. We are demanding affirmative action in the two sectors," he says.

POTWA's educational programme is aimed at developing the educationally disadvantaged workers.

According to Mabaso, "we have just started introducing COSATU's Adult Basic Education programme to the workers. Seminars and workshops are being organised."

Management is initiating sophisticated programmes and implementing them on the

ground. They are promoting literacy training and developing the skill levels of the workers without consulting POTWA. This has annoyed the union.

At present POTWA educational structures are very weak. There is no proper co-ordination in this field. Workers without specialised training in education are being asked to conduct their own educational seminars.

Mabaso says being fully employed means he does not have enough time to concentrate on the job he has been mandated to carry out.

"We are developing an educational programme which will focus on staff development, skills upgrading, shopstewards' training and the LRA."

Union officials admit the union will not be able to properly implement whatever educational programme is adopted without a fulltime national educational secretary.

Politics

POTWA's leadership currently wears many hats. The late campaigns' co-ordinator Floyd Mashele was also in the peace secretariat of the ANC. President Kgabisi Mosunkutu is also president of Civic Associations of the Southern Transvaal (CAST) and a senior member of the ANC.

Mosunkutu admits being involved in many committees makes a person less effective. "However, we have created sub committees and what helps us is that we work as a collective. The position taken by POTWA leadership is a principled one. We object to our leadership taking fulltime positions in political organisations."

The union's leadership believes it is presently very important for workers to be involved in the political struggle.

The POTWA leadership expresses confidence in and unequivocal support of the ANC. But this is not necessarily mirrored by the rank and file. It is well known that many COSATU members, including members of POTWA have expressed unhappiness with CODESA II. In several COSATU meetings I attended, they questioned the ANC's unilateral decision making.

On the question of COSATU's independence from the ANC-led alliance and the future government, the union leadership says COSATU does not take instructions from the ANC and that issues are being discussed in a comradely spirit.

But Mosunkutu does not rule out the possibility of a future government's proposing a moratorium on wages and strikes. "It will depend on the discussions the union has with the future government. All we are interested in is the economic growth and stability in our country."

Challenges facing POTWA

In the eight years since it was established, POTWA has become known for being very effective in its campaigns. Its young, militant leaders are mostly from the class of June '76. They have the reputation of being with the masses. They plan strategies and tactics together with workers. They have penetrated a racist environment and a sector which was meant to be for privileged whites only. They have fought not only for union recognition, but for black workers to be respected as human beings.

POTWA's independence, militancy, non-racialism and the current wage negotiations victory has attracted workers of other racial groups.

Now, with the interim agreement in place, the union has to prepare itself for an intellectual battle if it is to grow and spread its influence throughout the postal and telecommunication sector.

The head office needs skilled staff who can take on the task of collective bargaining. Regional offices like the Northern Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which lack personnel, need urgent attention. Shopstewards' councils and branch committees have to be revamped. The education department needs to be re-organised and a national education secretary appointed.

Stumbling blocks or hurdles to the proposed mergers into a single union need to be overcome. It is only through dialogue and patience that a progressive union can win the others over. ☆