

# Unions and new social movements: can they cooperate?

Can the new social movements largely based at a local level forge active links with unions which have emerged from a different tradition and ways of working? This is not a new question for unions to confront, but **Mthetho Kali** takes a fresh look at the possibilities



One of the most important developments in the 'new' South Africa is the emergence of community movements like the Western Cape Anti Evictions Campaign (AEC), which is struggling against the neo-liberal policies of the ANC government. New social movements such as the AEC defend communities from attacks from local authorities.

Local governments, in their drive to recover costs, hire lawyers to pressurise those who do not pay for services. A failure to respond to

a lawyer's letter demanding payment is followed by attachment of movable property, water cut-offs and evictions. These cost-recovery measures have not only been condemned but also resisted in struggles by the emerging movements.

Such struggles forced the City of Cape Town to adopt a moratorium on evictions. Trade unions have, however, been absent in these struggles though some union resolutions have condemned the government's neo-liberal policies. This is a departure from the 1980s

when trade unions, particularly shop stewards, played an important role in community struggles. The absence of labour in these local struggles motivated Ilrig (International Labour Research and Information Group) to study whether there are obstacles in the way of linkages between labour and new social movements.

In a case study we looked at relations between the Western Cape AEC and the Samwu (SA Municipal Workers Union) Cape Town Metro branch. We chose these two because members of both

formations are affected by the neo-liberal restructuring taking place in the City of Cape Town. We set up focus groups of AEC and Samwu members in a range of communities and interviewed them. Below is a summary of this study's outcomes.

### POSSIBILITIES FOR COOPERATION

Our study revealed a number of possibilities for collaboration. It showed that if both organisations consciously work on such possibilities, links between them could be consolidated.

Firstly, it emerged that Samwu as a relatively well-established and well-resourced formation has assisted the AEC in a number of ways. It has made a hall at its Athlone offices available for AEC general council meetings. It has provided AEC with photocopying facilities to print posters and pamphlets for their protest marches. Samwu shop stewards have also held education programmes on water issues and basic plumbing for community activists from areas affected by water cut-offs. These workshops dealt with policies that prevent access such as the government's cost recovery principle.

Secondly, Samwu's formal rejection of commercialisation and involvement of the private sector in service provision opened up possibilities for joint campaigns. At its 7th National Congress, Samwu "re-affirmed its opposition to the privatisation and commercialisation of municipal services". It also "...resolved to campaign for the immediate outlawing of prepayment meters for water and electricity...".

Thirdly, many Samwu members live in the same residential areas where the AEC organises which makes working together easier. The

location of some of the council depots which are Samwu's workplaces in working class areas where AEC affiliates are located, also makes cooperation possible. For example, the Khayelitsha depot is situated in Mandela Park which is very close to the Andile Nhose Community Centre where the Mandela Park AEC has an office and holds meetings.

Fourthly, there is awareness among some of the Samwu shop stewards and ordinary members and amongst AEC members of the need to work together. Some workers and shop stewards said the following, "Samwu needs to have a tactical relationship with the AEC so that we can deal with the issues that affect our people. Sanco (SA National Civic Organisation) has been silent on cut offs and evictions and the AEC has occupied the vacuum. Samwu's view on basic services is that people have a right to access and cut offs are undermining that right. The relationship with the AEC becomes relevant."

Other shop stewards commented on evictions thus, "I am in solidarity with those that are being evicted and resisting evictions because if I can lose my job I can also lose my house". One of the workers in the focus group said, "I fully support the struggles of the AEC against evictions. I have my own relatives staying in Mandela Park."

AEC members said the following about cooperation with Samwu, "We think the relationship with Samwu can assist the community. Since they are council workers they can provide us with relevant information that can help our struggle. They can help us with relevant people within the council where we can place our problems and demands. In the past we have

struggled to get relevant people within the council. We can also assist them in their strikes, by appealing to community members not to take council workers' jobs when they are on strike. Samwu must support our R10 campaign to pay R10 flat rate for services."

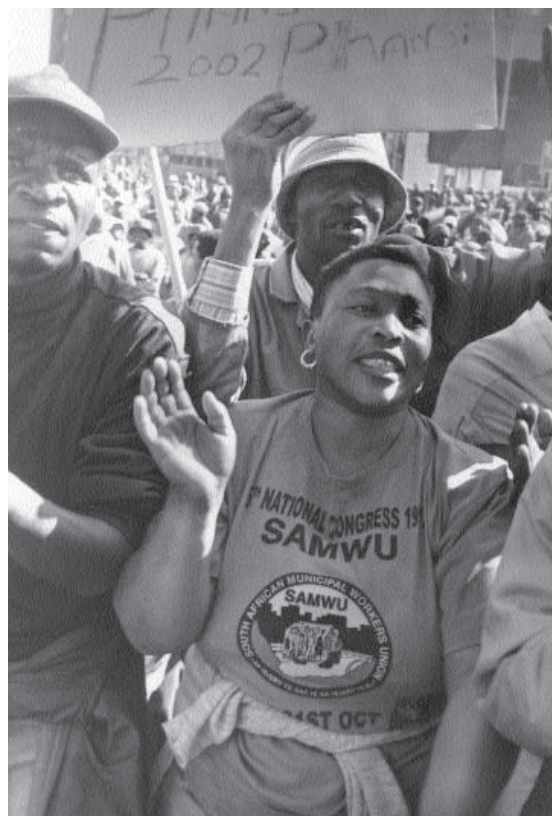
Finally, many of the interviewees commented on the fact that their members and supporters are the targets of local government actions. As one person said, "When privatisation is implemented both workers and community members are affected. The quality of services declines as the private provider is more concerned with how much profit it must make and this affects the community of which workers are a part. Some of the workers lose their jobs as a result of privatisation. Alliances between community organisations like AEC and unions like Samwu are in the interest of both formations."

Despite the above possibilities and the adhoc Samwu support, there is little evidence that Samwu members are playing an active role in AEC activities even where they live in the same communities. There are almost no examples of joint campaigns at a local level or at the level of the Unicity. Cooperation is limited to the initiatives of a few individuals.

This brings us to what we term 'obstacles that stand in the way of linkages' between these two formations. It is these obstacles that explain why the AEC and Samwu have not tapped the potential of working together.

### INSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

The first obstacle concerns institutional arrangements. The Samwu constitution limits membership to workers employed in local authorities/councils and



allied undertakings. It excludes those who get retrenched and those who go into retirement.

With the continued neo-liberal restructuring of the City of Cape Town many workers will lose their jobs. Once they lose their jobs, their Samwu membership will be terminated. This closes a possibility for unemployed sections of the community to become members of both Samwu and emerging social movements like AEC whose following consists mainly of the unemployed. This also excludes Samwu membership from organisational access to the unemployed which might facilitate links between labour and emerging movements. Catering for retrenched Samwu members within Samwu might force the union to take up issues affecting the unemployed and in so doing come to deal with similar issues that AEC members are taking up.

Another institutional arrangement associated with trade unions which may act as an obstacle is the tradition of democratic process through national structures. For example, if the members of a branch want to

endorse a local social movement's campaign this would have to go through a process of national discussion and ratification which militates against such joint local action. This is compounded when there is a national union position promoting an alliance with the ANC and the possibility of a region or branch acting differently is ruled out.

### POLITICAL OBSTACLES

The second obstacle concerns the differing attitudes that AEC and Samwu have towards the ANC government and Sanco.

The AEC sees its struggles as a direct response to government policies. The effects of these policies on poor communities have made the emerging movements extremely critical of the ANC government. The absence of local ANC activists in the struggles against evictions and water cut-offs has convinced social movement activists that there is no distinction between the ANC in government and ANC cadres in the community. Government policies are viewed as attacks on poor communities. As a result of experiences with the ANC some of the AEC activists and supporters opted to stay away from the 2004 polls citing the absence of pro-poor policies for their abstention.

This stance is contrary to the position of Cosatu and its affiliate Samwu. According to the Samwu 7th National Congress declaration, "Congress re-affirmed its support for the ANC in the forthcoming 2004. It also re-affirmed the alliance as the political centre, while at the same time recognising the many problems and weaknesses that plague the functioning of the alliance. As part of strengthening the alliance, Congress resolved to

encourage members to become members of alliance structures."

Cosatu has also reaffirmed its commitment to the tripartite alliance between the ANC, the SACP and itself and resolved to support the ANC in the 2004 elections.

Alongside the political differences to the ANC in government are differing attitudes to Sanco. AEC members have serious problems with Sanco while some Samwu members are either supporters or active members. The AEC members see the emergence of the AEC as a response to the failure of Sanco to take up struggles against water cut-offs and evictions.

In communities such as Khayelitsha, for example, Sanco is viewed as part of the problem. AEC members cite the signing of a Joint Cooperation Agreement with Khayaletu Home Loans which stated that, "All our clients are obligated to pay their bonds and failure to do so will result in legal action."<sup>1</sup>

Cosatu on the other side, while acknowledging the failure of the tripartite alliance to take up issues affecting communities, resolved to help build and strengthen Sanco in order to lead community-based issues. Resolving to build Sanco with the objective of leading on issues that it has failed to take up will not assist to build unity between labour and the emerging movements. Cosatu's criteria to determine which social movements to work with further undermines working class unity. Amongst other things it advises its affiliates to first assess, "Whether the agenda of these organisations does not aim to liquidate or undermine the alliance partners". Such criteria do not facilitate unity, given emerging social movements' opposition to the ANC ruling party.

### DIFFERING APPROACHES TO ORGANISING

The third obstacle relates to different methods of organising and campaigning.

Samwu workers are critical of the direct action methods of the AEC that sometimes result in the destruction of council property, like council vehicles. Those interviewed noted instances where council vehicles with workers inside were stoned.

The direct action of the emerging movements is also different to the kind of legalism adopted by trade unions towards the issues they take up. For example, when a certain service is threatened with privatisation, the union response has been to consult with lawyers, to show that certain processes in the legislation have not been followed. This emphasis on the law has downplayed the need to mobilise communities in support of the union position against the privatisation of services. Such legalism contrasts with the militant methods of AEC activists in re-instating evicted households. On the other hand, the AEC activists are finding it difficult to sustain such forms of direct action in the face of police repression and uncertain community support.

### DIFFERING VIEWS ON COMMUNITY PROJECTS

The fourth possible obstacle relates to differing views on community projects. Some of the AEC affiliates have initiated projects that can play into the hands of the privatisation agenda. Examples of such projects include street sweeping and meter reading. These community projects serve a dual need. They are about improving poorly serviced community spaces and they are

opportunities to earn in the context of high unemployment.

Samwu members, on the other hand, view some of the community projects as self-exploitation projects as they involve cheap labour. Samwu's view is that projects related to municipal services must remain under the municipality to avoid exploitation of communities and exploitation by private contractors. Samwu also insists that the council must employ additional workers that will clean the streets in poor communities.

### DIFFERING GENDER COMPOSITION

The fifth issue that emerged in the course of the study was the differing gender composition of the membership of Samwu and the AEC. The majority of active members of the AEC are women (even though key leaders are male) while men are dominant in Samwu. Actions and views on the part of Samwu that are not sensitive to an active female base of the AEC might undermine linkages between Samwu and AEC.

In order to overcome the above obstacles and build links between emerging movements and trade unions more will be required than positive comments and formal commitments. Simply condemning each others' actions or apparent lack of action because of differing attitudes to the ANC government will also not assist in overcoming barriers. Both AEC and Samwu will have to look at practical solutions that they can act on to realise the potential of alliances between organised labour and emerging social movements. Such efforts will clearly contribute to promoting a broader unity of the working class.

Given the possibilities of co-operation and the neo-liberal

attacks faced by workers at their various workplaces, the emerging movements must develop a strategy to engage trade unions in their struggles. Local community formations engaged in struggle must find ways of initiating discussions with Samwu or council workers at various levels.

This might take the form of requesting a meeting with Samwu or council workers in a particular depot to discuss issues around a struggle in that particular community. It may also take the form of inviting Samwu or council workers to a community meeting that will discuss community struggles. At such meetings the form of participation by Samwu and council workers can be discussed.

This approach goes beyond meetings of national or regional leadership of various organisations and promotes the interaction of a broad layer of activists and ordinary members. This interaction and the struggles of the movements will put pressure on trade unions to debate changes to their structures where these act as barriers to the building of solidarity and joint struggles. It will also put pressure on unions to review resolutions that do not facilitate unity in struggle.

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*This article is based on an International Labour Research and Information Group (IIRIG) research report for the Centre for Civil Society conducted in 2003 and completed in 2004. The full research report is available at [www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs) and [www.ilrigsa.org.za](http://www.ilrigsa.org.za)*

<sup>1</sup>*Kbayelitsha Anti Eviction Campaign, 2002, 4; [www.antieviction.org.za](http://www.antieviction.org.za)*