

Unions for unions?

The case of MSF in Britain

COLIN ADKIN and BRIAN HARRIS work as union research officers in the London Head Office of MSF, Britain's biggest union for "white collar" workers (or, as MSF puts it, "for skilled and professional people").

But Colin and Brian not only carry out their union duties for the union's 300 000 members, they are also elected Shopstewards for the staff that the union employs, representing them for pay and grievance issues against the union as their employer.

The idea of union staff being unionised is novel in the South African context, with some union leaders in South Africa having gone on record to the effect that unionisation amongst union staff suggests either serious staff disloyalty and lack of commitment, or, worse, is subversive of the goals of trade unionism.

Here, Adkin and Harris explain how the practice works in their own union.



Collin Adkin



Brian Harris

Bargaining units

MSF has a total staff of about 3eight0 or 390, divided up amongst two head office sites based in London, and two5 regional offices scattered around Britain.

These employees are divided, for bargaining purposes, into two groups: "staff" (as we call them) numbering about two60 and the "officers" numbering 1two0 to 130. The "staff" are organised into the white collar section of GMBATU (general, municipal, boilermakers and Allied Trade Union), called Apex (Association of Professional and Executive staff).

GMBATU-Apex is recognised by the union that employs the staff, MSF, and there is a status of full recognition for GMB-Apex, under a Collective bargaining and Procedural Agreement.

The "staff" comprise the clerical and secretarial staff, as well as the more professional employees (legal officers, bookkeepers etc) and Heads of Department. The "officers", who are *not* covered by the GMB-Apex/MSF agreement, comprise the union officials who negotiate on behalf of the union with management at national and regional level. They are in fact members of the MSF (a situation arising from the fact that most of them started off in the union as MSF workplace members) and their own pay and conditions are determined in negotiations between them and the MSF Executive Committee.

The bargaining process

The GMB-APEX members elect their reps into a committee (called the NJC – National Joint Committee) which meets 5 times with MSF union management annually. The staff side of this committee is an eight-person body made up of four persons from MSF regional sites and four from the two Head Offices. There is also a regional rep at each regional site to handle the day-to-day issues.

For bargaining purposes, the MSF Executive appoints four Executive members to assist the Assistant General secretary in negotiations with the unionised staff on the NJC. This negotiating team is in close contact with the MSF Finance and General Purposes committee who are, obviously, best informed about the union's finances, the ability to meet staff wage demands, etc.

Although the staff bargains annually just before the officers, there is no relationship between the two units. Last year, for example, the two groups got completely different increases.

The bargaining is serious business. The principle of trade unions is to apply pressure to advance their members interests, and we do this. We have the right to strike

and in practice we are free to use that right. The agreement recognises our common goals however, and we are committed to refrain from striking until all procedures have been exhausted.

Disputes

The dispute procedure is rather cumbersome. In the case of an individual grievance, for example, the immediate manager of the employee aggrieved is approached. Failure to reach satisfaction means the matter goes on to the next superior in line (for example the Head of Department), then on to the AGS, then on to the NJC. If we still cannot get resolution we call in the GMB- Apex full time official who comes to represent the member before the NJC too. It is a faulty procedure because the same people end up talking to each other more than once, but the slowness of the procedure affects both sides equally: our member can't get his/her complaint fixed quickly but at the same time the union management can't get quick-fix discipline enforced against our member either.

On matters both of right and interest the next step is to go to ACAS (A UK-government conciliation and Arbitration Service) if both sides agree to that. Otherwise we ballot members and can then go on strike if members choose. There is no formal strike right in Britain, of course, and in practice there have in our union only been two strikes in the past 15 years. The most recent one was in 19eightfour when the union management withdrew the inflation proofing. The strike went on for two weeks, and the union conference had to be postponed. But we lost the strike eventually and had to return to work without winning our demand.

Factors affecting bargaining

Bargaining over salaries often comes down to arguments over what the union's priorities should be. We always know perfectly well what the state of our employer's finances are, so "disclosure of

MSF & APEX

Agreements

Terms and Conditions of Employment

Procedure Agreement

Sexual Harassment and Equal Opportunities

Safety Policy

Introduction of New Technology - Consultation Procedures

Selection and Use of VDUs

Cervical Smear Testing

Work Related Upper Limb Disorders



information" is never an issue. Typically we'd argue, as staff reps, that the unions should be diverting resources spent currently on expensive executive meetings into better staff conditions instead.

Typically, such suggestions end up in a sub-committee and never seem to get resolved, while the MSF – Executive's demands to retrench staff are somehow always given priority!

Our union (MSF), like many in Britain, is in a state of "managed decline", involving staff cuts, and we have joint committees with union management to ensure this is done fairly. Because of membership losses, subscriptions have been raised steadily (by more than inflation rate) for several years now, and the staff are thus in a position of knowing that they cannot win big wage increases. We tend to argue for increases on the basis of comparability with wages paid in the industry. Obviously the union has to pay competitive rates*, or it will soon lose staff, and the MSF management recognises this. In general staff conditions are not bad, compared with the business world: Hours of work are 3four hours per week, and overtime is 1 1/2 x normal. Senior staff at offices do not get paid for overtime, though – they get time off in lieu. Everyone is covered, under the agreement, by a clause stipulating that they are required to work "as needed". We are trying currently to work towards a flexi-time arrangement to move away from the traditional 9 – 5, "us-and-them" staff/management relationship.

Handling the us-and-them problem

The "us-and-them" problem *is* a problem. Some of the union Executive Committee members seem to pick up the typical authoritarian attitudes of their own workplace managers and import these attitudes into the way they deal with their own union staff. It gets everyone's backs up, and it is unnecessary: We are pushing for a much more co-operative ethos with a

better team spirit. A lot of union resources go into the staff employment/management area: The AGS used to spend 50% or more of his time on personnel matters until recently, when the union hired a personnel manager. And about 50% of the union's funds go on employees' salaries etc. So there is a general debate going on (see next article. Ed.) about how to get the most out of the enormous allocation of resources. There is not much training going on for example, and we as the staff union reps are pushing that there be much more of it and much more systematically applied. Currently it's too ad hoc – the occasional word processing drive, for example.

We also participate, as the staff union, in the debates about how the union (i.e our employer, MSF) could better meet its members needs. There's the beginning of a monitoring system re membership satisfaction with their union. Interestingly enough, a recent independent survey by a university research team discovered that – contrary to conventional wisdom – the members join the union less for material benefits (insurances, discounts etc) and more for the basics of trade unionism: legal protection at work, protection against victimization, unfair retrenchment etc.

In general, there is nothing to justify the "union-staff should not be unionised" argument in Britain. The reputation of unionised union staff speaks for itself – everyone knows strikes hardly ever happen amongst union staff because they are motivated people working for organisations that they support in principle.

Despite this, there are some unions that hold out against union rights for their own staff. USDAW, (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers) for example. But there is a dispute going on there now, with staff demanding union recognition and bargaining rights. ☆

The pay differentials between semi-skilled/skilled and professional rates are very much narrower in Britain than in South Africa:Editor.