

Globalisation has forced unions to confront a whole range of new challenges, one of them being how to deal with the growth of workers in the informal economy. How can unions organise such workers? **Pat Horn** provides some pointers of how unions should be dealing with this.

Unions targeting the unorganised



Most workers in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region are working outside of the formal economy but few unions are open to informal workers to assist them in exercising their rights as provided for in key International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions such as those relating to freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively.

CHALLENGES FOR UNIONS

The following include some of the challenges for unions in organising informal workers

- *Political will:* Getting union leadership to prioritise the organisation of workers in the informal economy, and to make human and financial resources available to implement this.
- *Legal changes:* If a country's laws are an obstacle to organising workers in the informal economy, unions need to lobby for the necessary changes to the laws.
- *Constitutional changes:* Changing trade union constitutions where this is the

obstacle to organising informal workers.

- *New organising strategies:* Learning new organising strategies, which are more appropriate for workers in the informal economy. This could mean identifying new negotiating partners (for example, municipalities in the case of street vendors, rather than employers) and new collective bargaining strategies and demands.
- *Women leadership:* Overcoming the traditional male bias in formal sector trade unions in order to have significant leadership by women (who are in the majority, especially in the lowest income-earning work) in the informal economy.
- *Learning from those doing it already:* By means of exchange visits or other engagements, unions can learn from the experiences of those who are already organising in the informal economy, avoid some of the mistakes and replicate the more successful strategies - rather than reinvent the wheel. There are many different models operating in different

African countries - so sometimes a combination of different models can be applied where no single one fits exactly.

- *Organising workers in the informal economy as workers and as equals:* Because of the greater marginalisation of workers in the informal economy there is often a tendency for formal workers to want to do things on their behalf instead of organising for them to represent themselves and set their own agenda.
- *Joint campaigns:* It needs to be borne in mind that for successful joint campaigns there must be demands set by the workers in the informal economy as well as the demands of the formal workers. If the formal workers set all the demands and the agenda and expect the support of workers in the informal economy when there is nothing in it for them, it will not work.

MODELS FOR ORGANISING INFORMAL WORKERS

There are already a number of examples of

organising informal workers internationally, such as women unions in India (SEWA); the national centre and affiliates extending scope in Ghana with sectoral unions incorporating informal associations; a national centre of informal unions in Benin and extending existing bargaining forums in Uganda.

The following include some examples in the SADC region:

- **Lesotho:** The National Union of Retail & Allied Workers (NURAW) has provided organisational infrastructure to a national street vendors' association Khathang Tema Baits'okoli that is now affiliated to StreetNet International.
- **Malawi:** Retrenched presidents and general secretaries of affiliates to the Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) formed the Malawi Union for the Informal Sector. This union, which is affiliated to StreetNet International, waged a battle to be registered by the authorities, and was finally registered in late 2004.
- **Mozambique:** The Organizacao dos Trabalhadores de Mocambique (OTM) formed an informal sector association, Associacao dos Operadores e Trabalhadores do Sector Informal (ASSOTSI) in the Maputo province, with the intention of developing ASSOTSI to become a national union. ASSOTSI, which is also affiliated to StreetNet International, has since also opened up in the Sofala region, and aims to expand to other regions with the assistance of OTM's organisational infrastructure.
- **South Africa:** Since the enforced liquidation of the Self-Employed Women's Union (SEWU) there is no national organisation in South Africa of workers in the informal economy. StreetNet International has only a provincially based affiliate, the Eastern Cape Street Vendors' Alliance, in South Africa.
- **Tanzania:** The Industrial & Commercial Union (ICU) of Tanzania has started to organise workers in the informal economy.
- **Zambia:** The Workers Education Association of Zambia (WEAZ) established by the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions

(ZCTU) assisted informal economy associations in Zambia to establish the Alliance of Zambian Informal Economy Associations (AZIEA), which is now affiliated as an associate member of the ZCTU. AZIEA is also affiliated to StreetNet International.

- **Zimbabwe:** As a result of a project of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) supported by the Commonwealth Trade Union Congress (CTUC) the Zimbabwean Chamber of Informal Economy Associations (ACIEA) has been formed. ZCIEA is also affiliated to StreetNet International.

CONCLUSION

In 'Creating Opportunities for Fair Globalisation in Southern Africa: a response to the ILO's World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalisation', Professor Eddie Webster and Andries Bezuidenhout of the Sociology of Work Unit, University of the Witwatersrand, suggest that unions should 'consider developing a dual organising strategy, including a "community-based" approach to organising, in conjunction with other "shopfloor" organising methods'. This suggestion is made in recognition of the fact that representing workers in the informal economy requires 'new organisational forms and new strategies'.

However, another (more direct) way would be for unions to develop a new approach to the 'workplace' of workers in the informal economy (where the workplace is the streets, the homes of workers, or any other place where informal workers work) and for unions to define their organising activities and strategies according to the types of workplaces where their members are working - still organising their members primarily as workers rather than as community members or consumers.

Horn is head of Streetnet International in SA. This is an edited version of input made by Horn during a workshop on fair globalisation in SADC, taking into account recommendations made in the Report of the World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalisation.

COSATU MOVES TO ORGANISE WORKERS IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

Cosatu has resolved to organise workers in the informal economy, following the example of national trade union centres in Ghana, Zambia, Mozambique, Tanzania, Senegal, Benin, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger and elsewhere in Africa.

A national strategic planning workshop was held on 10 - 11 February to plan this. Participants included representatives from Cosatu, former members of SEWU, one representative from Sikhula Sonke, a new union representing seasonal agricultural workers in the Western Cape Province, while StreetNet International provided technical support.

After thorough debate it was agreed to initiate a project towards the establishment of a new union for street vendors and producers (including home-based) groups who will be organised into co-ops.

Members of the union will pay membership subscriptions, which should be collected by stop order/debit order. Where necessary, members will be assisted to open savings accounts. This union could be an associate member of Cosatu rather than an affiliate, at least initially, while discussions continue about the best way for informal unions to fit into Cosatu structures.

It was agreed that a national coordinator should be dedicated to the implementation of the project - to work with organisers around the country. A steering committee and a technical committee were set up to provide guidelines and support the coordinator.

The following campaigns will comprise the Programme of Action:

- Campaign on right to trade
- Information/education/rights
- Banks and credit
- Accessing government services
- Co-operatives
- Launch of the new union (planned for June 2006)