

Viva, *Labour Bulletin*, Viva!

Surviving and thriving from 1974

When you read a copy of the *Labour Bulletin* you are partaking of a rich, important and continuing history.

Johann Maree one of the *Bulletin's* longest serving Board members takes us through some of the highlights of its 36-year past keeping an eye on why it survived.

When a new industrial sociology, rooted in the analysis of the labour movement emerged out of the political environment of South Africa in the 1970s, academics and other intellectuals began writing clear and easy-to-understand articles aimed at the black African working class in the *South African Labour Bulletin*.

The *Bulletin* also linked the practice of active involvement in emerging trade union organisations with learning. It did so by helping people who had been denied a higher education the opportunity to understand and use their experience in furthering their struggle for economic and, eventually, political liberation.

ORIGINS AND STEPS TO AUTONOMY

The origins of the *Bulletin* lie in the Durban strikes of 1973 and the upsurge in black unionism that followed. It was in this context that the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) emerged.

At the inaugural meeting of the IIE in May 1973 Harriet Bolton, a leading union figure in Durban, pointed out the lack of knowledge of workers'

rights, which workers who didn't have time, money, or access to educational facilities were unable to remedy. Foszia Fisher, wife of banned pro-labour Rick Turner, proposed a correspondence course for workers and a resource centre to provide unions with material and information.

Turner had the vision of establishing a journal to explain and legitimate unions for black workers. Thus, the *Bulletin*, a monthly publication circulated to unionists, politicians, academics and other interested parties was launched off the back of the IIE in 1974. The first issue was devoted to making the case for African unions. The two most active members of the Editorial Board were founder members Turner and Eddie Webster. Webster has over many years continued to sustain the *Bulletin* and ensure that it supports the labour movement.

AUTONOMY OF THE BULLETIN

Later a struggle for autonomy began in the emerging union movement between the Trade Union Advisory and Coordinating Council (Tuacc) a tight-knit federation of unions that emerged after the Durban strikes and

the IIE. It was over whether the IIE would be subordinate to the emerging union movement. In 1975 Tuacc succeeded in subordinating the IIE's educational role to its own organisational needs.

The *Bulletin* was not subject to the same pressure from Tuacc and managed to increase its autonomy within the IIE by means of three incremental steps.

The first was a decision in 1974 to clarify accountability by only listing members of the IIE Working Committee who were involved in the production of the *Bulletin* as members of the *Bulletin's* Editorial Board.

The second step was a decision by the IIE Working Committee that it was up to the *Bulletin's* Editorial Board to decide about the publication of controversial articles.

The third step was an IIE resolution that the *Bulletin* could appoint people to its Editorial Board who were not involved in the IIE, resulting in the appointment of academics from universities. The outcome was the reconstitution of the *Bulletin* as a national journal with editors in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg.

When the state banned 26 trade unionists in 1976, it delivered a blow to the *Bulletin* which had to pioneer the publication of articles in the universities in order to survive. The academics on the Board helped to ensure a flow of free copy through their own involvement in the labour movement, their extensive social networks, and the research they conducted and supervised. The *Bulletin* had entered a new phase of its existence that secured its survival.

FINANCES

A crucial requirement for the sustainability of the *Labour Bulletin* was its financial viability.

Direct sales of the *Bulletin* raised 41% of total revenue in 1975-76, 44% in 1978 and by 1993 were twice as high as the number of subscribers. The *Bulletin* strove to promote union readers and in 1989 a system of shop steward sales people was set up raising print runs to 9 000 copies. However, this was not a source of revenue it could rely on.

Subscriptions from academic staff and students, as well as from companies and personnel managers, provided a solid revenue base. Many companies during the 1980s and 1990s were faced with black unions for the first time and the *Bulletin* was a valuable source of information for them. The *Bulletin* charged companies, libraries and other institutions double the individual rates in order to cross-subsidise sales to workers.

Company subscriptions rose through the 1980s and more than doubled between 1988 and 1994. It reached a peak of 394 in 1996, but by 2009 it had fallen to a mere 33. At the same time subscriptions from unions totalled 2 524. This was the way of funding the *Bulletin* while making it available to its members free of charge.

The *Bulletin's* finances went through four stages during its first 25 years of existence.

The first, during the 1970s, was one of complete self-sufficiency.

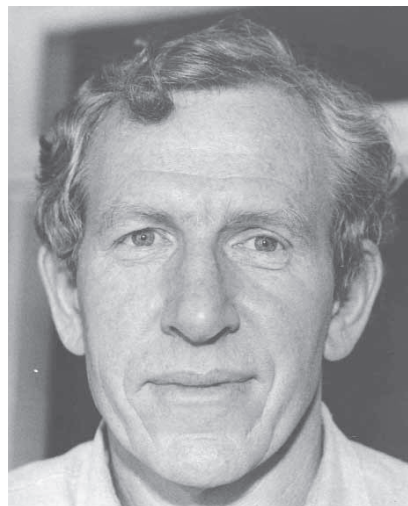
The second stage, during the 1980s, relied heavily on overseas donor funding to survive. Donations constituted 57% of revenue in 1983.

The third stage, from 1988 to 1994, was one of expansion and increased subsidisation. By 1989 donations constituted 70% of its total revenue. At this point the *Bulletin* was made more attractive and easier to read and photos were introduced.

Production of *The Shop Steward*, a publication directly aimed at worker readership, was taken on by the



Founder member, Eddie Webster, has over many years sustained the *Labour Bulletin* and ensured that it supports the labour movement.



Johann Maree, writer of this article and the longest serving *Labour Bulletin* board member.



Rick Turner (right), a founder member of the *Labour Bulletin* who was assassinated by the security police in 1978 with his wife Foszia.

Bulletin in 1992 on behalf of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). Contract money from Cosatu, together with overseas grants, totalled 77% of total revenue.

In 1994 the *Bulletin* joined three other publications in setting up the Independent Magazines Group but by the time the move took place *Work in Progress* had folded and the Independent Magazines Group collapsed.

In the same year the *Bulletin* lost its lucrative contract when Cosatu decided to produce *The Shop Steward* itself. And due to the

political transformation of South Africa, the *Bulletin* lost the support of many overseas donors who considered the struggle for liberation over.

The fourth stage of the journal's financial development began in 1995 with an objective of making the *Bulletin* financially self-sufficient again. But by mid-1996 only half of the budget had been raised independently from sales, subscriptions and advertising and, although overseas grants were still coming in, it could only achieve 68% self-sufficiency by 1998. From 1999

onwards the level of self-sufficiency started declining again.

By 2009 the *Bulletin* only raised just over one third of its required income, the balance coming from donors. A significant change was that the largest donor was now the South African state, signifying the change in political orientation of the country.

The financial survival of the *Bulletin* was thus primarily built on middle-class and corporate subscribers and grants from overseas.

REPRESSION, BOARD AND EDITORS

The first hostile Nationalist state act was to ban two of the earliest issues of the *Bulletin*, claiming it was inciting workers to strike. In 1975 the state detained two members of the Editorial Board under the Terrorism and Suppression of Communism Act – Bekisisa Nxasana and Eddie Webster. Although the charges against them were not related to their involvement in the *Bulletin*, the detention had an impact on it.

The assassination of Rick Turner by the state's security agents in 1978 sent a clear intimidatory warning to those involved in the independent labour movement. In 1987 the house of Jabu Matiko, a writer for the *Bulletin*, was destroyed by petrol bombs on the same night that Cosatu's head office was bombed. And in 1979 the state infiltrated the *Bulletin* by getting a secret agent appointed as managing editor for six months.

The *Bulletin* faced its most serious challenges when editor, Merle Favis, was detained with 12 unionists including Neil Aggett who died in detention. Another editor, Jon Lewis was deported. But even when the *Bulletin* was without an editor for 14 months, six issues were published due to the efforts of Editorial Board members.

Through a combination of competence and commitment, each editor ensured an uninterrupted flow of production and administration of the journal. Working under stressful

circumstances, they ensured it was produced and that it fulfilled its role of serving the labour movement.

FOCUS AND RELEVANCE

The final reason for the survival of the *Bulletin* lies in the relevance and focus of its contents. The *Bulletin* set itself clear goals and published a wide array of articles with the aim of always helping to defend and advance the democratic labour movement. The articles were sometimes critical of the unions and, as a result, the debates were intense.

The fiercest debate was over the registration of unions after the Wiehahn reforms in 1979 when African unions were granted the right to join industrial councils. The Western Province General Workers' Union published an article strongly opposed to registration. Fine, de Clerq and Innes replied justifying the Federation of South African Unions' (Fosatu) decision to register. Ten articles on this appeared in the *Bulletin* over three years.

The Board had been caught off-guard and had no policy to deal with such heated controversies. It decided to draw up a policy. This document was also drafted in the light of meetings with Cosatu and Nactu (black consciousness National Council of Trade Unions) leadership in 1988. Cosatu wanted to know to whom the *Bulletin* was accountable and Nactu accused it of an anti-Nactu bias and pressed for an official to sit on the Editorial Board. To deal with these issues, the Board drew up a careful policy document which included:

- The *Bulletin's* primary task is to support and help build the democratic labour movement by providing information, analysis and news that the unions and other organisations need.
- Open debate and critical analysis are indispensable to building and retaining democracy in the union movement as well as broader society.

- The best way for the union movement to account for its policy decisions is to make information available to the broader working class through publications that are not tied to mass movements.
- Unions cannot forbid the publication of material but if they disagree with articles, the *Bulletin* is prepared to carry material that presents the unions' side. The *Bulletin* is committed to a process of consultation with the democratic union movement without being controlled by it. The *Bulletin* promotes democracy and freedom of speech. The decision whether to publish or not resides with the Editorial Board although the views of the unions are and will be considered.

CONCLUSION

The *Labour Bulletin* made a significant contribution to the establishment of a democratic union movement in South Africa. Through its policy of critical engagement it helped the labour movement become and remain accountable to a larger public constituency.

It also achieved one of its original goals of becoming a journal for unionists. By so doing, it provided a pedagogy of the oppressed that enabled black workers to overcome their individual powerlessness by organising their collective strength.

The *Bulletin* survived the turbulent 1970s and 1980s by establishing itself as an autonomous journal, remaining financially viable, withstanding state oppression and publishing relevant material. Above all, it survived due to the capabilities, commitment and perseverance of its Editorial Board and managing editors. LB

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