



women
IN THE UNIONS

“Women must know that there is nothing they cannot do as human beings. The majority of women are capable and they must stand up to do the jobs. Women are the backbone of our organisations and while they take a back seat, they will be left behind ... ”

DOROTHY MOKGALO

This is the message to South Africa's women workers from COSATU's new gender co-ordinator who started work at COSATU Head Office on 2 March 1992.

She received a warm welcome at the COSATU national women's workshop held in Johannesburg over the weekend of 14/15 Nov 1991.

“We have fought for our structures and for our programme in the national congress - and now we can see the result of our efforts in our co-ordinator who is leading the workshop today ... ”

For Dorothy herself, it had

been a long road to reach this point. With 17 years of experience as a worker and a shop steward, first in MAWU and later in NUMSA, she is one of the most impressive of COSATU's worker leadership.

She started work in 1974 at Stork Napkins and worked there as despatch clerk until 1980 when she moved to National Bolts in Wynberg, near Alexandra where she was born, went to school and still lives in a rented room. It was at National Bolts that Dorothy first joined a union. Other manufacturing plants of

National Bolts were organised by MAWU and by 1985 the workers in the Wynberg distribution section also wanted to join MAWU. Management proposed another union. “We resisted,” says Dorothy, “and told management they could not choose which union workers should join.” Dorothy was elected along with one other woman and two men as the MAWU shop stewards for the plant and later for NUMSA.

In the eleven years that she worked at National Bolts, Dorothy became active as local education secretary in



Dorothy Mokgalo

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

the Transvaal Education Committee and later in 1989 as the chair of NUMSA's National Education Committee. In this period she also began to play an active role in the COSATU Nedcom, in the Women's subcommittee and national policy meetings of COSATU. In 1991 she was appointed education officer in NUMSA's Wits East region and barely a year later was appointed as COSATU's National Gender Co-ordinator.

"I have seen that the women are most in the forefront at shopfloor level. At National Bolts, for example, we won six months paid maternity leave with job security and paternity leave (of five days paid and seven days unpaid) -

even before it was won in the engineering sector," says Dorothy, "and that was because women were active and we were negotiating forums where we could make sure our demands were not compromised. That is what we have to do in our affiliates and in COSATU."

What are her ideas for the gender programme in COSATU? With her experience as a worker and shop steward, discussion in the Women's Subcommittee of collective bargaining strategies for improving the position of women workers is gaining a sharper focus.

But Dorothy stresses that the rights of women cannot be secured solely through collective bargaining

strategies. The demands of working class women must be protected in the Workers' Charter and the Women's Charter and even in the new constitution of South Africa. COSATU women and COSATU members will have to make their input into this discussion.

Another issue Dorothy raises is the need for mixed gender forums to discuss these issues in COSATU. "COSATU national congress in July 1991 decided on a two prong strategy - one to continue the work through the women's forums and secondly to take up issues through gender forums." COSATU's national women's subcommittee is set to continue its work more vigorously and effectively with Dorothy at the helm. Organising the mixed gender forums is a responsibility of the constitutional structures and exactly how this is to be done must still be discussed with the national office bearers.

Meanwhile she continues at head office with the quiet determined strength that is so characteristic of COSATU's women worker leaders. Adjusting to working in the COSATU national office brings its own challenges - "I am missing the direct contact with workers, I used to go from the factory to the local," she says, "and now there is a gap. It will take time to adjust. But there is a lot of work to do at this level and a lot of gains to be made. The job must be done." ☆