

Worker blues at SABC

It was workers at the SABC who alerted the media to the financial crisis in the SABC last year. **Kate Skinner** tells how such dissatisfaction led to a new SABC Board and new hope. But there are signs that labour still has some battles to fight.

Workers have been unhappy at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) for a while now. Their woes go back to the controversial 2007 SABC Board appointed by ex-President Thabo Mbeki. Since then it has been a rollercoaster ride - some moments of real hope but many of disillusionment.

CRISIS BEGINS

The crisis really took hold with the direct presidential and party political interference in the appointment of the 2007 SABC Board making it illegitimate from the start. Although the Board cannot be held entirely accountable for the crises that ensued, it certainly played a major role.

As the battles raged between management and the Board and as the Group Chief Executive Officer (GCEO), Dali Mpofu was suspended and re-suspended, workers grew worried. The governance vacuum deepened and costs started to rise and revenue to drop. Corruption already a problem, took firmer root. Soon almost R1-billion was lost in one year!

As the financial crisis ensued SABC management and the Board maintained a stony silence. There were media leaks of debts rising and of creditors not being paid but it was only when workers talked to the media that the public got to know what was going on.

In an article in the *Mail & Guardian* in February 2009, workers expressed dismay at management's decision to renege on a three year, inflation-linked wage agreement signed by all unions. Management pleaded a lack of funds and finally revealed that the SABC was almost R700-million in debt.

At the same time, independent producers were informed that the SABC had no money to pay them. In an unprecedented show of solidarity workers, independent producers, actors, scriptwriters and media activists marched to the SABC in June 2009.

Marchers called for the SABC to pay workers and producers and for the SABC Board to be removed. There was growing public sentiment that at the heart of the SABC's woes lay a governance crisis and that to resolve this, the Board must dissolve.

Marchers also called for a new public service vision for the SABC. Soon after the Board was dissolved.

LIFE UNDER INTERIM BOARD

When the interim Board took office in early July 2009, the three major trade unions at the SABC (Communications Workers Union, Media Workers Association of South Africa and Broadcasting, Electronic, Media and Allied Workers Union) threatened to strike. After months, management had still not agreed to the annual salary increase.

To avoid 'blackouts on TV screens' one of the first interim Board meetings was with workers. Eventually management resolved to give employees a 10% increase across the board with the possibility of a once-off payment of R2 000 the following May 2010 if the SABC made a profit. The wage settlement was 2.2% less than workers' original demands.

However, workers were not only concerned about their increases but also about the long-term sustainability of the SABC. They called for firm commitments from management and the Board to deal with the corruption and wasteful expenditure.

Unions put together a detailed memorandum and presented this to Parliament, calling for an independent forensic audit. In terms of senior executive actions, workers noted cases of serious corruption and conflicts of interest. They noted the excessive use of consultants despite qualified staff and an increasingly top heavy SABC - a situation where 'general managers manage general managers!' Parliament called the

Auditor General to investigate.

The six-month interim Board period was one of stabilising the SABC. The interim Board immediately set up lines of communications with all stakeholders including workers. Austerity measures were implemented, including at the top. Board perks such as business class tickets and DSTV subscriptions were cancelled.

The interim Board focused on organising government guarantees to alleviate the financial crises. It also began to deal with management vacancies and disputes. Top of the agenda was to conclude the SABC's legal battles with suspended Mpofu. This was resolved with a golden handshake of R11-million including a R4.4-million restraint of trade settlement.

For workers this was a slap in the face. Mpofu had played a major role in the SABC's problems. The interim Board however argued that the payout was the only way forward to ensure the long-term resolution of this issue.

NEW BOARD TAKES OFFICE

In January 2010 the new Board and CEO, Solly Mokoetle took office. Unions welcomed it. Civil society through the 'SOS: Support Public Broadcasting' campaign, previously the 'Save our SABC' played a major role in putting forward nominations for the Board. A rigorous public process ensued through Parliament. Workers were satisfied that the composition of the Board represented the skills, experience and perspectives required.

Unions also welcomed Mokoetle despite a cloud of controversy hanging over his head. Mokoetle, employed in the dying days of the interim Board, was accused of authorising funding beyond his authority in a previous position he held at the SABC. However, his name was cleared.

Sadly, however, since the start of the year workers have not been enthusiastic about progress. The

Board has still not met officially with all union bodies. Mpofu's bankrupt vision of 'Total Citizenship Empowerment' is still in place. The much talked about turn-around strategy remains short on detail other than on cost-cutting measures, and the Auditor General's recommendations calling for improved reporting, more effective governance arrangements and improved leadership oversight are not materialising.

All three unions claim that intimidation continues and that their members are often suspended without clear evidence given. Clearly, human resource strategies need to be significantly strengthened.

However, these are early days. The task facing the Board, management and workers is enormous. The SABC has to pay back its government loans, attain a sustainable financial position, and deliver excellent public service television in a new multi-channel environment. It is set to acquire nine further channels to its existing three channels to make up 12 channels!

Progress on these enormous tasks will not be immediate. However, workers are clear that they want a transformed public service broadcaster and they are prepared to work tirelessly towards this as articulated in one of the Communication Workers Union's recent statements (14/4/2010), 'we want a transformed broadcaster and a new head of news who understands the political economy and development agenda of the country'.

Further, workers stated that they wanted a 'particular programming bias that ensures that the views and needs of the working class and poor, the majority of the SABC viewers and listeners, are catered for'.

Workers will maintain their vigilance and hope that this year's bargaining will be less acrimonious than the bargaining rounds of 2009. ■

Kate Skinner is coordinator of the 'SOS: Support Public Broadcasting' coalition.

Trouble at cash-strapped SABC

... Newsreaders Tembisa Marele and Isabelle de Taisser are both off air and are considering taking the broadcaster to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration after they refused to sign new contracts in December which reduced their income by as much as 60%.

Several newsreaders have also complained about the effects of financial cutbacks on them... The acting news boss Phil Molefe has come under fire for allegedly using freelancers to read the news for free as an opportunity to prove themselves on air...

Staff complaining about their conditions, an SABC employee claimed, were vulnerable because Molefe had acted 'decisively' against them. **Edwin Naidu, Sunday Independent 14/2/2010**

Popular TV newsreader Mahendra Raghunath has taken the SABC to the CCMA following his suspension by the national broadcaster last month.

Raghunath, who has been at the SABC for 12 years, was suspended following a newspaper report in the *Sunday Independent*. The report highlighted how budget cutbacks had negatively impacted on morale in the newsroom and the loss of viewers. Mwaas claims that Raghunath was 'suspended for allegedly talking to the media about the SABC. It was further provided by the media that it was actually not him.' **Avashnee Moodley, Sunday Times 14/3/2010**