

# *Workers, take control!*

*Bulletin: Does SAMWU believe the battle against Igoli 2002 is over? Are there any prospects for reversing the privatisation that has already taken place?*

*Ronnie:* There is an opportunity for us to halt and reverse the privatisation that has taken place in Johannesburg. It will require a massive campaign on a national scale. It cannot be restricted just to workers in Gauteng. So while we might have suffered in the last few months, SAMWU is quite confident that we can reverse the situation. Our last national executive committee meeting illustrated this. We have a dedicated team of comrades who can deal with all the elements of the Igoli plan. This team will be based in Johannesburg, taking responsibility for all areas of work - in the community, in the bargaining council or the other COSATU affiliates.

*Bulletin: Can you see SAMWU making peace with privatisation, and exploring prospects of turning it to the advantage of workers?*

*Ronnie:* I think there can never be peace for the labour movement, and the broader working class, with the issue of privatisation. This is because privatisation means the provision of services on the basis of profit, rather than on the basis of need. So we would never be able to make

*Rugaya Rees interviews  
Roger Ronnie - SAMWU  
general secretary.*

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peace with any plan to privatise basic services.

*Bulletin: What roll can COSATU play in the struggle against Igoli 2002?*

*Ronnie:* COSATU Wits, for example, has recently reaffirmed the need to revive the anti-privatisation campaign. We think that COSATU and its affiliates should be much more serious in taking up the campaign. I think that part of the failure has been the lack of consistency and dedication in fighting the Igoli plan. This has also contributed to the setbacks we have experienced. On its own, SAMWU will not defeat the Igoli plan. We will need to build very strong and principled links with other organisations of the working class and in the communities. We need to ensure that the working class as a whole are informed about the dangers of the Igoli plan and that they develop a programme to overcome and resist the plan.

*Bulletin: How does the union relate to the community, whom privatisation*

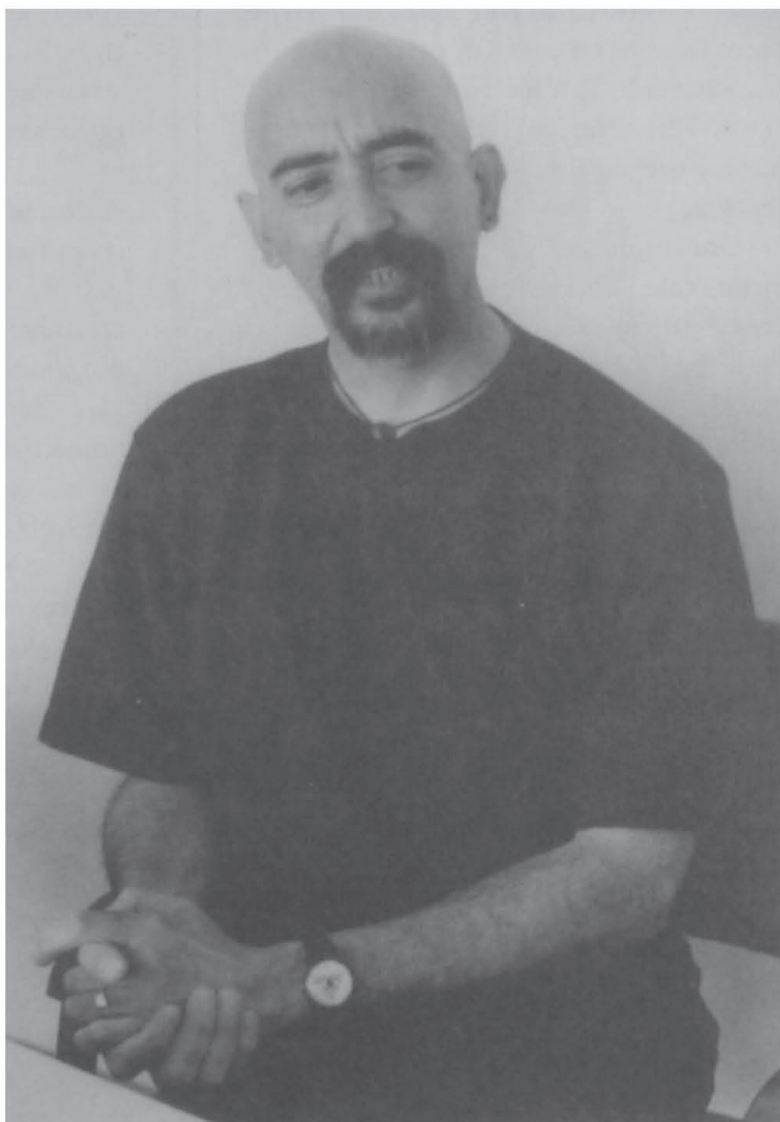
*affects? Can you also tell us about the Anti-privatisation Forum?*

**Ronnie:** Firstly, we have numerous congress / resolutions, which recognise that workers alone will not be able to win the battle. We need to work out programmes with community organisations to deal with privatisation. An example is the Anti-privatisation Forum, which draws together working class and student organisations, and other activists. It is an extremely useful vehicle for advancing the struggle against privatisation.

SAMWU would strongly encourage other affiliates to get involved in the forum. We have a union position saying that we should seek to build similar forums, in other parts of the country as well. We believe that it's going to take a working class response to fight privatisation, not simply a workers' response.

In Cape Town, for example, an Anti-privatisation Forum has just been established. It used to be called the local government transformation forum. It includes unions, political organisations, organisations representing evicted communities, and people that are faced with service cut-offs. More people join as the struggles of the communities become more intense and they feel the impact of the government's macroeconomic policy.

Because of unemployment, evictions, service cut-offs and so on, people are



*Roger Ronnie.*

looking for a way to give expression to their suffering. People have become disillusioned with some of the political parties and they are looking for other homes in which they can take their struggles forward. We are not saying that the Anti-privatisation Forum is a political movement. It's a forum where people feel they can talk about their problems and believe that some action may emerge, even if it is on a very basic level.

**Bulletin:** *Do you think privatisation can only benefit those who can afford to pay for it?*

**Ronnie:** Internationally and locally, where there have been cases of privatisation the negative side of it far outweighs any positive benefits. If you cannot afford to pay for the service, you will not get the service.

One argument says that privatisation means that services can be extended to everybody because government does not have the money. But what it doesn't say is that the service will stop at the end of your boundary. If you cannot pay for the water or electricity to your house, then you are not going to get it. The private company will only give if you can pay for it. So to me, the talk that says privatisation will make things better has been refuted in all parts of the world.

**Bulletin:** *What are your bargaining arrangements or agreements?*

**Ronnie:** It's very exciting in the sector now because on 1 March 2001 the bargaining council was registered. This means we now have the institutional space to deal with challenges confronting the sector.

Since the recent local government elections, the number of local authorities has been reduced from almost 800 to less than 300. It means that amalgamations, on a scale not seen in this sector before, have taken place. So for us the critical issue over the next year will be to create uniformity in the sector. For example, the Johannesburg council has linked up with what was Midrand and Kyalami previously. So workers with different conditions of employment are brought together. What we need to do is create uniform conditions of employment and a single job evaluation system for the sector as a whole. So we are going to have an extremely torrid period of collective bargaining over the next 24 months

addressing these issues. The first issue is the placement of workers into the structure and thereafter we will deal with equalisation and rationalisation.

**Bulletin:** *Does privatisation undermine collective bargaining?*

**Ronnie:** Yes, very much so. It undermines the process. We are of the view that the Igoli plan is not simply a plan to privatise municipal services, but it is also a plan to smash the union.

We say that because Johannesburg will now be broken up into many private entities and council-owned utilities, which are separate employers in their own right. At this stage these entities (both private and public) will not be part of the bargaining council. So in one sweep, over 60% of the workforce in Johannesburg falls outside the protection of the bargaining council. We have to engage with each one of these.

What is worse is that Johannesburg has outsourced its fleet to a private company, Superfleet. It is unable to employ all the workers into the operations that are servicing the council. So it is transferring workers into other contracts that it has elsewhere. So within a week of workers joining Superfleet, they were told that they would be going to Nelspruit or Roodepoort. These workers do not even work in the municipal sector anymore. The company also refused to speak to SAMWU, saying that they are in the motor sector, and if they want to speak to us, they need to get permission from NUMSA. They are claiming that they will only recognise our shopstewards for an interim period and if we want to continue representing our members we have to get admission to the motor industry bargaining council.

These are some of the real problems of privatisation: taking workers out of the

union they joined and undermining the collective bargaining arrangements. This holds major implications for the terms and conditions of employment of these workers.

**Bulletin:** What have you achieved for your members in bargaining?

**Ronnie:** Relating to wages, we received increases that on average have been above inflation. We ensured the minimum wage paid in the sector is R1 600 per month.

We have also concluded with the employers what we consider to be an extremely good organisational rights agreement. It applies to every municipality across the country. The agreement makes provision for a fairly liberal time-off for shop steward training. It also makes provision for a full-time shop steward for every 1 000 members up to a maximum of six for one municipality. The agreement says that you can never have more than six full-time shop stewards per municipality even if it has 20 000 workers like Johannesburg.

According to the agreement, if a local authority only has 500 workers and the local authority next to it also has 500 workers, these two authorities can have one full-time shop steward together. The two local authorities will share the cost of that shop steward. These full-time shop stewards assist in building the union in the workplace.

I think in the last few years, SAMWU



*'The gap between the centre and rank and file has grown.'*

has improved the conditions of employment of its members quite substantially. All of that is now obviously under threat with the move towards privatisation and the subsequent undermining of centralised bargaining.

**Bulletin:** What are SAMWU's strengths and what areas do you need to improve?

**Ronnie:** A weakness of the union movement, which applies equally to SAMWU, is the need to ensure that our members are in control of the

organisation And that the members drive the decision-making in SAMWU. We are looking at ways of improving mandate-taking procedures. For example, for our national wage negotiations we keep the cell phone numbers of all the shopstewards with cell phones in a central database. At the end of each round of negotiations we send out a short message on their cell phones saying what the current positions of the union and of the bosses are. We also prepare a pamphlet that we fax to the shopstewards. A full report is available at the union office. So workers don't read the information in the press first. They get it by way of a short message and pamphlet. The provinces can then set up their consulting processes based on workers already having the information. These are just some of the innovative ways to improve mandate-taking in the union.

SAMWU has a quarterly magazine, *Workers News*, printed in three different languages. It is an extremely useful tool for keeping workers informed of developments in the union. It also provides a forum for them to express their concerns. We also took a decision this year to take a full year's subscription to the *Labour Bulletin* for our shopstewards. This allows them to keep abreast of some of the debates of the labour movement as a whole, not just SAMWU.

We are currently investigating other technological advancements that can be used in the interest of the working class as well. These include things like video conferences, where you can pull shopstewards together in a single place and have a debate across the country.

We believe that these are the kinds of investments unions can make to build the organisation. As a result of the shift towards centralised bargaining, the gap between the centre and the rank and file

has grown over time. We have to find ways to close that gap.

The other issue that we have to confront is how we relate to the ANC, with whom we are in alliance and who constitutes the majority in most councils. In other words, they are both our alliance partner and our employer. Many of these ANC councils are actively promoting the privatisation of municipal services. So if a council restructures and it is not consistent with the union's position, we have to respond even if it means coming into conflict with our alliance partners. We lobby our position at council level and directly with our partners in the alliance. To date we have had limited success.

**Bulletin:** *Are women represented on your structures?*

**Ronnie:** Yes, women are represented. The sector employs about 15% women. The bulk of them are in administrative positions. SAMWU introduced a quota system of 30% a few years ago. This exceeds the representation of women because the idea is also to increase women's levels of employment in local government. We also have a quota system that applies at branch and provincial level. It allowed for the executive structures to have at least 30% representation by women shopstewards.

SAMWU's constitution does not make provision for a quota system at national level. So we are busy circulating proposals to amend the constitution to make provision for an entrenched quota system. Then we can have an entrenched quota system of 30% in all structures of the union: the executive structures, congress structures and at branch, provincial and national level.

Our constitution makes provision for women structures. Previously, we had women's committees in our branch,

provincial and national levels. We are changing that to gender committees. These committees will be open to men as well, but women will remain the majority in these committees. No more than 30% men can attend the gender committees.

We feel that at this stage it is necessary that women remain in the majority. Yet we want to encourage the participation of men. We don't see these steps as existing forever. We see it as a necessary intervention to ensure that women's and gender issues remain firmly on the agenda of all structures.

This will be the case until such time as these issues become part and parcel of our thinking and our actions in SAMWU. Then it will no longer be necessary to maintain a quota system and it will simply wither away. These are transitional steps towards full and proper participation by women in all structures of the union.

**Bulletin:** *Do you have a message for your members?*

**Ronnie:** The message that I think should go out to members is that they have a responsibility to ensure that the organisation is rightfully theirs. They should take control of the organisation through the shopstewards they elect. They should hold those shopstewards accountable and ensure that those shopstewards report back to them. They should ensure that the culture on which the labour movement was built – mandates, report backs and participation by membership – becomes the future of



*On its own, SAMWU will not defeat the Igoli plan.*

the union movement. So the message is quiet simple: Workers need to take control of the organisation.

**Bulletin:** *Do you have a message for the bosses?*

**Ronnie:** Well, I think the message for the bosses is while we might be a bit battered and bruised from the years of struggling against privatisation we have clearly not been defeated. The positions that we hold on privatisation have been vindicated over and over again. We are confident that we will emerge victoriously from the battle against privatisation and the fight for affordable services for all people. It is part of the realisation of a better life for which we have all sacrificed for so long. ★