

SIMON CONCO

General Secretary of UWUSA

UWUSA's founding General Secretary, Mr Simon Conco, reported at a recent Press conference that there has been an "overwhelming response" to the new union and its initial membership drive has exceeded all expectations.

In less than a month since its launch, UWUSA had been involved in the formal registration of more than 85 000 members.

"Our resources at the moment are stretched to the limit," he said. "Quite frankly, the few offices we have established cannot cope. We are paying attention to this and soon hope to be able to accommodate the thousands of inquiries we are receiving from individuals and many major trade unions," he said.

He added that UWUSA is currently involved in negotiations regarding formal links with five established unions who have a total membership of more than 250 000.

Negotiations with employers are underway with regard to recognition agreements.

A priority for UWUSA at present is the training of organisers and help is being sought abroad in the United States, Europe and Israel.

UWUSA is non-racial (several hundred white members have already signed up) and is seeking registration in terms of the South African Labour Relations Acts as a general union. It does, however, hope to grow into a federation supporting the policy of one industry, one union.

Mr Conco said he wanted it known "quite clearly" that UWUSA's aim (apart from

establishing its power base) was to concentrate on basic labour affairs and "to be free of political intimidation ..."

"Inkatha will not, and I repeat not, direct our affairs — as our detractors are fond of alleging" he said.

Ideologically, however, UWUSA supported Inkatha's stand for peaceful, negotiated change in South Africa and its opposition to disinvestment and sanctions.

Mr Conco also said that he would find accusations of UWUSA being a so-called "sweetheart" union funny — if

'I find it callous and insensitive for people who are working in factories to advocate a policy (of disinvestment) which will result in our people losing their jobs ... they are already suffering because of the downturn in the economy ...'

they weren't so serious.

"When you think about it, how will we ever hope to flourish if we don't produce the goods for our members? If we sold our members down the drain, we wouldn't last five minutes ..."

"The suffering black masses in South Africa deserve the best and no union can strive

'People who believe in disinvestment should leave their jobs ... leave factories which have overseas interests. The mass of black workers are not doing this for the simple reason that they do not support disinvestment and they do not believe this tactic will work ...'

for their rights unless they fight tooth and nail for them. We plan to do just that. We will succeed or fail on this alone ... the shop floor is where it counts ... we are sincere and we will just have to prove that ..."

He said it "goes without saying" that UWUSA would support the "struggle for liberation" in South Africa — but through negotiation, not violence.

"Negotiation skills are paramount, in labour and in politics," he added.

UWUSA's executive, in harmony with other union and political organisations, favoured one man, one vote in a unitary State. They would also "relentlessly" call for the release of ANC leader Mr Nelson Mandela and other political leaders and for the unbanning of political organisations.

In numerous interviews, labour reporters have appeared to be keen to know UWUSA's stand on stayaways and strikes.

Mr Conco said he wanted it made "crystal clear" that UWUSA believed in worker participation in all union matters and that the union would always "seek a mandate" before strike action was taken.

"Of course, we believe in negotiating and having the best possible people to seek consensus ... if negotiations fail, we will go back to the workers.

"There is a tendency among certain other union leaders to think for the people and take action without consulting them. UWUSA will not operate this way ..."

"The strike weapon is the one thing which workers have to use when negotiations between labour and management break down ..."



Mr Simon Conco

the right to strike is the workers' prerogative ... what I am trying to say is that we in UWUSA believe in using our worker power wisely."

He added that it had become obvious that there was considerable political interference in trade union activities in South Africa.

"Many people have told us their unions have been dragging them into ideologies foreign to them ... this is wrong. Workers have a democratic right to support political organisations of their choice without interference."

Mr Conco, a former member of the ANC, has deep political roots in the black struggle for liberation.

"I'm not opposed to the ANC, the real ANC," he said. "What I am opposed to is the stand taken by the External Mission of the ANC, especially with regard to violence and disinvestment. As far as I am concerned, Inkatha embodies the values of the ANC as I know it ..."

Mr Conco, 59, is labelled in the SA Press as an "elder statesman" who has wide experience in both the political and labour fields.

The former Chief Whip of the KwaZulu Legislative

Assembly (he has resigned from all his Inkatha posts so there can be no "conflict of interests") Mr Conco has for many years combined business interests with worker interests.

'We agree with COSATU that the South African Government has had a hand in mismanaging the economy of South Africa .. but tearing down the economic foundations of our future is not the answer ... it will not produce jobs, it will not feed, house, clothe and educate people ... there is enough suffering already ...'

He was, for instance, a leading figure in last year's Empangeni bus boycott — which lasted six months — and worked in harmony with unionists who have subsequently become actively involved with COSATU.

"I am a worker, I have always been a worker. I have no conflict of interests," he said.

"Like every other black man in this country I have suffered

the same indignities and I am as angry as the next man ... I will not rest until we are free. Nobody has a monopoly on black anger ... it is how you use that anger, how you direct it to attain your ultimate goals that counts.

"I want to look forward to a future with hope. What use is it to make empty promises? I want to make UWUSA a union that people believe in. I want workers to know that we will always do our best to deliver the goods but that, along the way, we will not deceive them just to make ourselves look good. People can't eat promises. They can't pay their bills with promises.

"Straight talk is sometimes unpalatable but in the end it works in your favour because if you don't underestimate your constituency, if you don't use them as your pawns, they respect you.

"I believe that worker strength lies in unity and the key to successful union leadership is to listen to the voice of the workers ..."

"If UWUSA does anything concrete, it will be to articulate the true feelings of the masses in South Africa — and do something about them".