

INTERVIEWS

SAAWU in the Transvaal

SAAWU, the South African Allied Workers Union, has been in the news lately following its presence at an Industrial Council session. In this interview by Jeremy Baskin, Herbert Barnabas, the national organiser, discusses this and SAAWU's organisation in the Transvaal.

How did SAAWU start in the Transvaal?

It started at the end of 1980 when I was still working for Hall and Pickles at Dunswart. Before that I was a member of African Food and Canning Workers' Union (AFCWU) under the late Dr Neil Aggett. I worked at Langeburg in Boksburg. I was in their committees.

Neil said AFCWU don't organise in steel. He recommended other unions but I wasn't happy with them. I was thinking of forming my own union. At Hall and Pickles there were problems with supervisors and I used to represent the workers, but as myself. Neil Aggett recommended to people like Kikine, that they had someone interested in starting up SAAWU.

Kikine and Gqweta came to me and I got a SAAWU constitution. I started organising at Hall and Pickles. Every Saturday I used to go to the offices of AFCWU in Johannesburg and they showed me how to fill out membership cards, write out receipt books and so on.

In March 1981, SAAWU was having a conference in Durban. By that time I had 137 members. I gave a financial report and a report of all that I'd done so far. The meeting decided it would be best to have someone in the Transvaal and they unanimously elected me. I was instructed to leave my job and work full-time. I gave notice and went to man the office in Lekton House where AFCWU had their office. We tried to get an office in Boksburg but couldn't, nor in Springs.

Later we were both (AFCWU and SAAWU) evicted from Lekton House so we set up here in Kempton Park until they found a place in Chester House, Johan-

nesburg.

By the end of 1981 I'd signed a recognition agreement with Oerlican Electrodes. In 1982 we signed another agreement here with Forte Lubricants, a chemical factory. We organised most of the factories round here, and with some we are recognised.

On 1st December 1982 we opened a new office in Pretoria. People find it's difficult to come here from Pretoria. Also there are the strategies used by management. For example at Ozalid, where we have 43 percent of the workers, they dismissed a worker. We went to represent him. But instead of reinstating him here they transferred him to Pretoria, thinking that we couldn't follow him. But we make good follow-ups. He became our mobilising factor in Pretoria.

There's only myself and one lady full-time in Kempton Park. But we have a lot of volunteers.

How does the volunteer system work?

Let's say you are out of work, for example, and you feel you don't want to remain idle, you can come and organise the workers. All we'll do is give you transport money and something to eat in the office. In SAAWU we don't use the system of payment. Whoever comes in does so for a trial period. We must find out if he really is for SAAWU or if he's simply come to get information.

What is SAAWU's Transvaal membership?

Membership is 5,000 plus, paid up. We have majority membership at Oerlican, Forte Lubricants, LTA Ground Engineering, LTA Conforce, Balbardie, Omega Barfel, Auto Executive, Hugh Meller, Blue Ribbon, Tools and Dies, Metal Pressings, Planbrin, Royal Hiring, Bawler Steel (Isando), Boart Tools, Robor, Bentley Belts and Vitreous Products (Isando).

How many recognition agreements do you have in the Transvaal?

Two signed agreements. There are another four committees that negotiate with management. SAAWU has long been blackmailed in the newspapers with irrelevant stories. I feel that we must give management at least six months negotiating before a formal agreement. Then if they sign they know who they're signing with.

Take Blue Ribbon, we're giving them enough time. That's why we don't rush to the papers. We don't believe in the emergency signing of recognition agreements for its own sake.

How do you organise?

We feel we must go to the workers for them to understand what we mean by 'active mass participation' or 'workers democracy'. The policy of SAAWU is that if a

worker comes, say from Krugersdorp, my organiser must find out from that worker the time when he goes on lunch. Shortly after, the organiser must go and meet with the workers to find out if they're interested in a trade union. What is the use of a worker joining a trade union alone before the others accept? If a worker is just by himself he might be a victim.

At least give me ten workers from any factory, then SAAWU is in! I shall hold a meeting with those ten workers, conscientise them fully and then I'll know I've organised that particular factory. These workers will recruit others. The next meeting there'll be twenty workers ... and so on.

We have started a new strategy of holding meetings almost every Sunday, right in the hostels. So if I hold a meeting in one hostel then automatically workers from a number of companies come and attend that meeting. Like yesterday, it was LTA Conforce's meeting in Tembisa, but we had workers from as far as Olifantsfontein who came to listen.

Over the weekend workers in the hostels have visitors from places like Springs. Now if a Springs worker joins — we have cards, receipt books etc. with us — his address is there and the following day my organiser will be there. That's how SAAWU spreads.

What makes us important is that we make sure the workers know what happens to their subscriptions. They must know that they are the people who pay for the rent of this office, the stationery, furniture, telephone. That's the only place we get money from, the workers. He should know that I am his employee. You give them more responsibility. That's why we in SAAWU don't believe in stop-order facilities. There is not a single company that deducts subscriptions for us. Even if they offer it, we refuse it. It's meaningless to say I represent 50 percent plus in a company if there are no paid-up subscriptions. It's the only way you can prove you've got a majority.

Our main principle is that the workers themselves must be conscientised. Our shop-stewards' committees must be in a position to represent the workers at factory-floor level. We say to them, 'Look, you've been elected as a shop-stewards committee, you are now the workers' attorney'. Anything that comes to us is something that has defeated our 'attorney'.

What are the major problems SAAWU faces?

Our big problem here is retrenchment. So far we have succeeded in representing our members. We have got a lot of reinstatement. The others have benefitted from notice pay, retrenchment pay etc.

At Vitreous Products, where we have a majority, we negotiated that the best was to have a four-day or three-day week. They agreed to that. In fact, to tell the truth, they are the ones who initiated that move. We got a number of workers reinstated there. Even with the hostel payments complaints, we wrote a letter, Mr Pienaar came here, we negotiated the issue and it was settled. The workers are

now happy.

We have problems where we don't have majority membership. In these cases you need legal advice. I've told one such company that we do have majority membership because there are workers from other companies who'll support the ones there. So they've agreed to negotiate some things with us. For example, they agreed to stop making UIF deductions for Transkeian workers (since it's illegal) and to repay the workers.

There have been criticisms that SAAWU lacks structure. What is the structure of the union?

It's as follows: I organise workers in a particular factory. I'll fight until I get over 50 percent. We then make a point that workers must elect a shop-stewards' committee comprising five people, who are known as the 'central executive committee'. They'll negotiate with management. In addition there are workers known only to the workforce and the union, and not to management. We've got shop-stewards in each department. The shop-stewards report to the executive committee who take it to management.

Once we are recognised by management and have a signed agreement then we call the executive committee and dissolve it and replace it with a 'negotiating committee'. If they still want the same people that's OK. It's up to them. They must negotiate working conditions and wage agreements with management, unless things have reached a deadlock.

Now if we have a minimum of four such committees, they get together and elect a 'branch committee'. To avoid having hundreds of people on the branch committee we say that the chairman and secretary of each factory together with two alternates come onto the branch committee and decide how things are to go.

Do they control you?

In my case I'm a national organiser so they must refer it to the conference. But with the others, like that lady here, they discuss it and get me to take it to the national council.

The money for the Pretoria office is also from here. When those people get viable then they must pay back the money. Before I sent the money I got the branch to approve. I'm also controlling the office in Estcourt by helping with rent and electricity. But my branch must give me the green light. In Estcourt they report to me, then I report back to the workers.

What structures exist beyond branch level?

At present we send the branch committees to 'national council'. But let's say we have more branches, say in Springs, Krugersdorp, then those people will have to come together to form a 'regional committee'. So I wonder what they mean when

they say there's no structure.

Now I've started something new, never done before. Besides the committees I've told you of I've got other committees known as township committees. If it goes my way, by June this year everybody in Tembisa will be saying SAAWU. We won't be organising in the factories, we'll be organising in the townships.

But is SAAWU a community organisation or a trade union?

It's a trade union but we align ourselves. We believe in SAAWU that you cannot differentiate a worker from the community aspect.

He works in the factory and gets paid. But what does the worker do with this money? He pays for the rent in the hostel, in the township. He supports his family in the township. How does he get there? He uses transport - trains, buses, taxis. He goes to church. To go to church you must have a ticket. How? With the money you get from work. Can't you say a church-person is a worker?

So does SAAWU then recruit people who are not workers — not working in a factory?

No. But the point is that some unions say 'we're only concerned about a worker when he's at work'. But I ask, what happens to a worker who's out of work? In SAAWU if we give you a trade union card then you're a member even when you're discharged. You won't pay during the months you're out of work. And when you get another job again you'll start paying and you'll be our organiser.

There have been reports recently that you participated in an Industrial Council negotiation, despite SAAWU's well-known opposition to these bodies. What actually happened at the AECI Industrial Council negotiations?

Many people have been asking me that question, even people in the union. There've been claims that SAAWU has joined the Industrial Council.

AECI has four branches — Modderfontein, Somerset West, Midlands and Umbogintwini. We have majority membership at Umbogintwini in Natal, but none at the others. When I came here, Modderfontein AECI had been organised by the CUSA-affiliated SA Chemical Workers Union (SACWU).

AECI are members of the Industrial Council but they have their own one, as a company. There came a stage where wages had to be negotiated. Before the workers joined trade unions there was what is known as the CCC (Central Consultative Committee) where the liaison committees were negotiating wages with management. During that time there were these white trade unions that were just delegating the message to the black workers, to their liaison committees.

So the first thing we fought for was to destroy the liaison committees. SACWU dissolved them here. We in SAAWU believe that an employer is responsible for the conditions in that company or branch. But when it came to AECI we found

that wages were negotiated nationally. We had therefore to let all the branches meet to negotiate wages.

So we went there to negotiate as trade unions — SACWU and SAAWU — and all the white unions were there. We were made by the company to meet with the white unions. The white unions had their demands, and SAAWU and SACWU had their demands from the workers. So we had to negotiate this with these white unions and then thereafter we met with management.

I'm not quite clear. You say you were at the Industrial Council and you say you weren't at the Industrial Council?

No! Let me tell you. Let's say there's a big river you can't cross on foot. Now there are two people on the other side — Jesus and the Devil. Now I want to cross the river with a skip to meet with Jesus. But Jesus has no skip. Only the Devil has one. I must get into the Devil's skip and cross over. When I get there I'll push the Devil aside and say, 'I don't want to see you, I want to meet with Jesus Christ'.

We found it feasible for us to go and negotiate with management at national level. You mustn't take it that sitting with the Industrial Council of AECl can be assimilated to sitting with the Industrial Council of SEIFSA. The unions there did not regard themselves as an Industrial Council, they regarded themselves as representatives of their people. This was not an Industrial Council.

We sat in on the negotiations. But we didn't sign the agreement. We sat there because we were negotiating wages, and nothing else. In the agreement it is stated that there is management with the white unions in the Industrial Council, and SACWU and SAAWU 'hereinafter known as the trade union of the other party'. Neither we nor SACWU were in the Industrial Council. The white unions were.

We gained a lot. The company wanted to give us about 11 percent but we got R322.28 for a lowly-paid person, from R280 previously. And they're getting another increment this July through our pressure.

At AECl they are paid at a national level not by the local management. You must talk to the employer of your members. AECl is the employer, not Modderfontein or Umbogintwini. If you call that an Industrial Council then I don't know what you mean. We were talking to the employer. You must forget this idea of Industrial Councils until such time as the membership of SAAWU tells us to join.

Do you think the present barriers to trade union unity are barriers of principle or practical differences?

As I see it we have not achieved unity in the full sense. There are unions still fighting for unorganised membership. There are also unions who'll say they have membership, meaning membership that is unorganised.

In August 1981 there was a meeting, and then one at Wilgespruit where there was talk of forming one federation of trade unions in South Africa. We see this as premature because of the lack of unity.

There is the argument, as progressive trade unionists, that we don't want registration or industrial councils. But there are those unions who regard themselves as progressive who still believe in registration. They will tell you there's worker control when there isn't. Every worker in SAAWU is told what his money does. We don't believe all the unions do that, for fear of losing their positions. This is power-mongering.

And there are also unions who say *black* worker control. This is foolish. We believe we are a non-racial group. If it's worker controlled, it doesn't matter who controls it, as long as it's a worker. Never mind if they're black, pink, yellow, white.

Once we attain unity, all that will happen is this — if you are GAWU, I'm SAAWU, he's MACWUSA — we say we talk the same language. Therefore a worker who's joined you in GAWU will have no interest in joining SAAWU. But as long as we don't talk the same language we won't be able to form lines of demarcation.

We have also held meetings to say we must hold solidarity meetings in all the regions. We have started in the Transvaal, to clarify this point of unity. We feel we must keep on holding solidarity meetings and meet together to form solidarity committees so that if there is a strike, these workers are there to support each other. Then after that we can decide on forming a federation should that be necessary.

Lack of unity is created by some unions not wanting to understand what we are trying to do. They're still defending some bureaucracy, while we want democracy. Or they are camouflaging the ideologies. There's not enough unity to form a federation. It will open up loopholes for the enemy.

(Kempton Park — 28/2/83)
