

Media workers on power and participation in real decision making at work

As the readers of *Labour Bulletin* know, we members of the Media Workers Association of South Africa (MWASA) have been out on a long strike over wages paid to black workers on SABC TV and radio services [see *Labour Action* – ed]. We black professional workers still suffer racial discrimination in wages and employment conditions, appointments, training and promotion – as blacks suffer in other areas of work in this ‘new South Africa’.

However, we would like to tell you about other particular problems that black journalists and presenters, camera operators and other technical workers employed by the SABC have at the workplace – or on our ‘shop floor’.

Black faces and voices, but whites still control everything

Although we are professional workers, like workers elsewhere in South Africa, we have no decision-making powers in our work, and initiative is kept out of our hands. Our white colleagues dominate and hold all decision making positions in the SABC.

Despite the appointment of black faces to some managerial positions, our black colleagues who are on the board of directors have no powers at all. Like the rest of us blacks, they do not really decide on issues.

MWASA members, Sam Petlane, Sello Thulo, Sibusiso Magasela and Vincent Mfundisi, warn fellow workers:

“We black radio and TV presenters are looked on as sell-outs. We are often ashamed when we go to our communities because of the lies that we have had to read.”

Journalists - no freedom to report what we see

Despite the fact that we journalists live in the townships and know the realities of the experiences and thinking of fellow black people, we are not able to take an influential part in reporting what is going on. We are not given the right and freedom to express our views, or to contribute to changing the culture of South Africa.

Our job is not to really help shape the content, but only to put flesh or ‘local colour’ here and there. If you come up with ideas, it is such a problem to get approval. You can’t use your own imagination.

Researchers – very limited scope

Researchers, too, have very limited scope. As a news researcher – for example in

Scoop and Agenda – you are given a particular assignment to research. It is not blacks who suggest what the programmes should be. What we are doing is simply gathering information on a given topic. There is very little creative work that you are involved in.

Commissioning and sanctioning of programmes is the responsibility of the editor plus the producer.

Editors – minimal influence

In Scoop and Agenda there are only two black editors and their influence is very minimal. The final word and the shape of the programme is decided upon by the executive editor who is white.

If it is political, and it affects the lives of white communities and is researched by a black person, that programme will never see light. These are just some of the serious methods of continuing political control over what is seen and discussed on radio and TV in South Africa.

On important programmes – for example where Nelson Mandela will be on the air – three researchers, two whites and one black, will be called to a conference room to prepare questions. We all table questions, but it is management who decide which questions to use. You

won't know whether your input was relevant or not.

Programmes bought in from outside for black audiences are screened and selected by our white colleagues – some of whom are members of the CP and the Broederbond. For instance, in the Drama department, which is headed by a black person, they just push programmes at him claiming that these are what are good for us. Blacks who are 'heading' departments have no power. They can't pull a trigger on anything. This really frustrates us.

Camera operators - kept dependent

As camera operators, too, SABC does not give us room to develop. We are only given black productions to do. It is a 'privilege' to work on a white programme and you are told not to make a 'mess' of it. Black cameramen are made to depend entirely on their white colleagues.

Even if you have bright ideas on how to improve programmes, you know that you will be told that your ideas are irrelevant. This demotivates us. It is only now that we are given training, but still some of the courses that we undergo are not relevant to our profession.

Black radio announcers and editors under white decision makers

As in all other sections, black editors in the radio depend on whites who are the decision makers. You are not given the



On the picket-line at the gates of the SABC

Photo: William Matlala

responsibility to plan and be involved in the production of programmes. 'Mental work' is left to our white seniors.

As radio announcers we do everything – from collection of information to the final presentation. It is very difficult to be a black announcer within the structures of the SABC. We do our own typing, editing and presentation. At the end of the day, the pay does not reflect the tasks that we have to do.

It is different with white announcers. They just read scripts which have been prepared for them. This is really unfair since they earn more than us black announcers and yet do much less.

White radio and TV presenters are celebrities in their communities. We black radio and TV presenters are looked on as sell-outs. We are often ashamed when we go to our communities because of the lies that we have had to present.

Who is influencing black public opinion?

It is frustrating to work in such

an environment. We are looking ahead, but there are people who are putting concrete blocks in front of us. Our white colleagues are not prepared to change at all. Some senior editors are even members of the Conservative Party. After the Potchefstroom by-election they told us openly they were busy the whole night working for the success of the CP.

These are the type of people who are placed in strategic positions to influence public opinion. How can we have such people controlling editorial content on 'black' radio and TV? They are the ones who are controlling our work, and have big influence on the thinking and public opinion in the black population of South Africa.

We want our fellow black workers to know that most of what they see or hear on 'black' radio and TV is still being decided by Broederbond and CP whites, even if there are black faces and voices there. ☆