

## Merger To Form New Transport Union

The independent trade union movement in South Africa has taken an important step on the road to "one union, one industry" with the merger of two unions in the transport sector. The merger, between the Transport and General Workers' Union and the Cape Town based General Workers' Union, took place in Pietermaritzburg on May 24 and 25. It is the first merger within the ranks of the COSATU and falls within the federation's aim, announced at its launch in December last year, of "one union, one industry" within six months. Unions in the food sector will merge at a conference to be held on May 31/June 1. Inter-union talks in the metal sector are also reported to be at an advanced stage.

The new union is called the Transport and General Workers' Union and bears the old GWU logo. It will have about 24,000 signed up members, of which about 22,000 are paid up. The general secretary is Jane Barrett, former general secretary of the old T&GWU. The president is Jerry Ntombela, COSATU regional chairman in Northern Natal and a Richards Bay coal terminal worker, the first vice-president is Frederick Gona, formerly the GWU president and a worker at Everite in Brackenfell, the second vice-president is Alfred Ndlovu, a bus driver with KwaZulu Transport and the treasurer is Vivian Zungu, a Putco driver from Springs.

The old T&GWU, which was affiliated to the Federation of South African Trade Unions before COSATU's formation, brought about 14,000 signed up members, of which about 11,000 are paid up, to the new union. About 6,000 of T&GWU's membership were municipal workers and about 2,000 were cleaning and security workers. The union also had 6,000 members in the goods and passenger transport sectors. At present, the municipal workers will stay in the new union until a new national municipal workers' union gets off the ground. About 1,000 of these municipal workers are employed in the transport sector of municipalities anyway, and will thus probably stay permanently in the new union.

T&GWU (the old one) has been organising municipal workers in the Transvaal and Natal for five years and has recently won recognition and stop order rights at the Johannesburg municipality. Jane Barrett reports that sector meetings with other COSATU affiliates organising municipal and local government workers have

been "productive, although co-operation on the ground has been slow." One of the last National Executive Meetings of the old T&G passed a resolution recently expressing the union's commitment to establishing a new national municipal union.

The cleaning and security workers are likely to remain permanently in the new T&GWU. "We have always pushed quite hard that they should come in with the transport workers, because they, too are part of the services sector. The cleaning and services sector is also very competitive and thus wages are low and the workers are vulnerable," according to Barrett.

The organisational backbone of the GWU has been its national strength in the stevedoring industry. The majority of its 4,000 transport sector members were stevedores. It is this control of a waning, but strategic industry that has made the union disproportionately powerful in relation to its numerical strength. (see M Morris in SALB 11.3 and 11.5)

The union also has over 4,000 members in the building supplies industry, about 800 in the engineering and metal sectors and about 1,200 in the services and local government sector. The engineering and local government workers are concentrated in the Western Cape. However, in the building supplies industry, the union has every major firm in the Western Cape, as well as Corobrick in Pietermaritzburg and Empangeni, and two asbestos-cement manufacturing plants, Everite and Turnall, nationally. GWU organisers said before the merger that "while we are really committed to the policy of one union one industry, we are not going to hand over our building supplies workers to a non-existent union." There has, as yet, been no consensus on the question of their eventual union home, but at the moment they will remain in the new T&GWU. "There is no other union that has substantial numbers of building workers and we are very definite about keeping them in our union until a proper building workers' union gets off the ground," said GWU official, Di Cooper.

The new union will be organising principally in a sector which employs some 400,000 people. About 75 percent of all workers in the transport sector are employed by South African Transport Services (SATS), which raises important questions about the union's future direction. Organising the railway workers will be a crucial challenge which the new union will have to confront. It is an awesome prospect, not only because of the size of the SATS

- merger -

operation, but because of SATS' proven hostility to independent trade unions. There are few who will forget the valiant, but in the end unsuccessful, battle that the GWU put up against SATS in the Port Elizabeth docks in 1982. After its defeat, in spite of strong organisation, the GWU realised that railway workers could only be successfully organised under the protection of a large federation.

The two merging unions have been in agreement that railway workers should come into a transport union. However it is a matter of some controversy within COSATU itself. The South African Allied Workers Union, which has some SATS members, believes railway workers should be organised separately into a railway workers' union - a practise in some European countries.

Constitutionally, the merger has not posed major problems. A crucial difference in the two unions' constitutions is that GWU office-bearers are elected at an Annual National Conference, comprising representatives from all the regions and factories in the union. The highest decision making body in the old T&GWU has been the National Executive Committee, which was elected by branch committees. The T&GWU delegation accepted the Annual National Conference as part of the new constitution. Likewise, the GWU accepted a T&G clause that places finances under national, rather than branch control. A new addition to the constitution for both unions, is the establishment of an office-bearers' committee which will meet on a monthly basis. The office-bearers are thus expected to take on a great responsibility in the day-to-day running of the union.

There will be six regions in the new union: three in Natal, Coastal, Northern and Midlands; one in the Western Cape, one in the Eastern Cape; and one in the Transvaal. Each region will elect four delegates to the NEC, except where there are over 5,000 members in the region, in which case six delegates will be elected. The union also has the embryo of a branch in the Orange Free State among bus drivers recruited by the Retail and Allied Workers Union.

Before the merger, the two unions said they were confident that the amalgamation would be a merger in the truest sense of the word. "Neither union will end in a real sense," said Cooper. "The new union has T&G's name and our logo. We have also brought almost equal numbers of members to the merger." Quite apart from the new union's strengthened presence in a critical sector of the economy, the merger stands as a landmark on the road to industrial unionism. (Pippa Green, May 1986)