

# NACTU members launch a new metal union

---

In May this year, three NACTU unions came together to form a new metal union. JABU MATIKO was there to record the event and assess the implications for unity and organisation in the metal industry.

---

The launching of a new metal union called MEWUSA was the first implementation of the principle of one union one industry in the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) since it was formed in 1986. The union was launched against a background of co-ordinated state attacks against trade unions and the democratic movement, as well as tough annual wage negotiations with metal employers, who are also planning to deregulate some businesses in the metal industry. A problem for the unions in this contested terrain is the absence of any unity between COSATU and NACTU unions, and especially in the metal industry.

Against this repressive background, over 1,000 workers flocked to NASREC on the 27 May to launch the

Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (MEWUSA). Unions which participated in the merger are the Black Electrical and Electronics Workers Union (BEEWU), the Electrical and Allied Workers Trade Union (EAWTUSA) and the Engineering and Allied Workers Union (EAWUSA). The new union claims a membership of 69,000 paid-up members and 110,000 signed-up.

Workers sang freedom songs and engaged in *toyi-toyi* dancing before the congress started. After two hours of jubilation delegates and observers registered for the congress. Files which were handed out to delegates reminded them that the purpose of the Launching Congress was "to build bridges among the workers by merging the different unions to which they



*Singing and dancing, delegates arrive at the MEWUSA launch*

*Photo: Labour Bulletin*

belong into one union." The MEWUSA launching congress took place two weeks after NUMSA, the COSATU metal affiliate with 180,000 paid-up membership, held its congress.

The following office bearers were elected:

- President - Raymond Khoza from EAWTUSA,
- Vice President - Enos Ngobe from BEEWU
- General Secretary - Tommy Olifant from EAWTUSA
- Assistant General Secretary - Zithulele Cindi from BEEWU.

### **It took two years to form MEWUSA**

The merger talks started in 1987 when nine unions that are affiliated to

International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) began discussing the possibilities of merging into one union. Five of them were NACTU members. At its congress in November 1988 the South African Council of the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF) adopted a resolution to support the merger of these unions. However, only three unions, all affiliated to NACTU, finally came together in MEWUSA. These were BEEWU, EAWTUSA, and EAWUSA. This left out five metal unions. Two of them, the Steel Engineering and Allied Workers Union (SEAWUSA) with a claimed paid-up membership of 30,000, and the United African Motor and Allied Workers Union (UAMAWUSA) claiming a paid up membership of 13,000, are NACTU

affiliates.

The other three unions are: South African Boilermakers Society, Radio and Television, and Engineering Industrial Workers Union. These three unions held the position that old unions must not disband, but instead a federation of metal unions should be formed. This contrasted with the model of a single new union which NACTU affiliates wanted.

### NACTU affiliates stay out

NACTU affiliates SEAWUSA and UAMAWUSA say that their membership decided not to be part of the merger because the merger talks were handled in an undemocratic manner in their own unions.

According to Kgotso Kodisane, the new acting general secretary of SEAWUSA, the delegation which attended the merger talks and later became part of the steering committee was not mandated by the majority of workers in SEAWUSA. "There were no meetings to discuss the merger with the rank and file by way of giving report-backs and getting new mandates," he said.

Another issue which prevented SEAWUSA from continuing with the merger plans was the suspicion of corruption in the union. "At the special congress called to discuss the undemocratic process that characterised the merger plans in SEAWUSA, the general secretary, Jane Hlongwane, had been asked to prepare the union's financial statement. When she could not do this, the congress discussion

centred on the question of a financial statement. A decision was taken to hold another congress on 20 November. By that stage Hlongwane had resigned without giving any reason. So at the second congress members held that the merger was a ploy by the resigned official to sweep the corruption that had hit the union under a carpet. The congress resolved to establish a commission of inquiry in the financial matters of the union and suspended discussions on mergers."

UAMAWUSA's reasons for not merging into MEWUSA are similar. Peter Makgathulela, who is the acting general secretary, explained to the *Labour Bulletin* that their general secretary Dorah Mathe was suspended on 21 April this year pending a commission of inquiry into the financial matters of the union. Makgathulela claims that the union has so far established that Mathe owns a sewing project in Pretoria. It is suspected that the project was initiated by using money raised from overseas under the pretext of using it for the union affairs. When asked to comment on this situation, the NACTU assistant general secretary, Cunningham Ngcukana explained that the federation is not aware of these findings, but has sent UAMAWUSA's financial books to the auditors.

The two unions have presented the absence of democratic practises and financial corruption present in the former administration as the primary cause for not continuing their participation in the merger. Both unions have dismissed rumours that they are



not part of MEWUSA because of the political differences that have now emerged inside NACTU.

Kgodisane comments: "People who argue that SEAWUSA is now outside MEWUSA because of political differences are distorting our position." UAMAWUSA's Makgatulela explained that, "MEWUSA cannot be grouped into the Africanist or the Black Consciousness group since EAWUSA is Africanist, BEEWU is BC, and EATWUSA being neutral, are all present in the new union."



### MEWUSA birth is welcomed

NACTU was delighted by the formation of a giant metal union in the federation. NACTU president James Mndaweni told the MEWUSA congress that it was unfortunate that some NACTU affiliates could not immediately join the new union and stressed that MEWUSA will be guaranteed

support by NACTU.

NUMSA, the largest IMF affiliate, regretted the launch of a new metal union. However, one of its congress resolutions called for NUMSA and COSATU to put more effort in achieving one industry one union. NUMSA also instructed its central committee to push the IMF to re-open merger talks for all IMF affiliates, as agreed in the last IMF congress held 1988.

The only guest speaker from unions outside NACTU was from CCAWUSA. Mandla Seloane, an education officer in the Mtwana CCAWUSA wing, told the congress that the two unions must recognise each others right to exist. However, he challenged MEWUSA and NUMSA to be honest to the slogan of one union one industry, which both are vocal about.

### Political resolutions

The first resolution reflected on the role of MEWUSA in the working class struggle in the country. It called for "support and co-operation with progressive political actions taken in the interest of working class struggle by democratic and worker controlled unions, federations and other progressive organisation." The union also resolved to give active support to all "progressive pro-worker" and "socialist" groups within the country. The union declared that the implementation of national and regional programmes directed at building working class links and unity between factory-based and community-based

## **UNIONS AND DISPUTES**

struggles will facilitate the achievement of a "non-racial, non-Capitalist Democratic Socialist society".

On the question of the strategy and tactics to be adopted in changing the present political and economic system, the union denounced a negotiated settlement as a "manoeuvre by the imperialist powers to strike a deal with the present government to rescue Capitalism". This resolution cautioned that "a negotiated settlement with the South African government under the present set of circumstances can only lead to a betrayal of the working class, and must be rejected in the strongest possible terms." Other resolutions included the call for freedom of speech, the lifting of the state of emergency and release of political prisoners.

### **Tasks facing the new union**

Some NACTU affiliates are outside MEWUSA, and that is a serious setback to unity of metalworkers in NACTU. However, the assistant general secretary of MEWUSA, Zithulele Cindi, is optimistic that SEAWUSA and UAMAWUSA will join MEWUSA once their internal problems are resolved. "MEWUSA is a NACTU project. MEWUSA will work closely with other NACTU metal affiliates. We will work closely together and persuade them to join," he said.

The other challenge facing MEWUSA on the question of worker unity is to forge unity with NUMSA. NUMSA has already established itself as the commanding force in the metal

industry. MEWUSA recognises the need to work with NUMSA. This encouraging direction has the potential of creating a powerful force if the two unions co-operate in joint campaigns. Joint campaigns unions will boost their ability to challenge the metal bosses. MEWUSA has 69,000 paid-up membership, while NUMSA has a paid-up membership of 115,000 in the iron and steel industry alone and about 73,000 in the automotive, motor, tyre and rubber industry.

Co-operation on the ground between MEWUSA and NUMSA members allow MEWUSA members to learn about the experiences gone through by NUMSA members in their past living wage campaigns and other struggles against employers. NUMSA's growth has always been rapid during its wage campaigns. After the 1988 living wage campaign NUMSA increased its membership by 10%.

What is encouraging is that MEWUSA has also committed itself to worker unity as a guiding principle. The union resolved at its congress to place unity of workers above the "narrow ideological interest of competing political factions".

### **Both NUMSA and MEWUSA support unity**

If both MEWUSA and NUMSA are committed to unity in principle, the remaining question is how to achieve it in practice.

There are factors that could serve

as a basis for this unity. The primary factor is the affiliation of the two unions to the IMF and their membership of the metal industrial council. However IMF has been a problematic forum for union unity in the past. The experience of last year when the IMF alliance fell apart must be a subject for critical assessment in both unions. Caution is needed to avoid hardening of attitudes. The need for critical assessment and self criticism is posed by the challenge from the metal bosses. The lack of union unity, which is an advantage for bosses, is seen as a problem in MEWUSA. Cindi argues that it was "a miscalculation on the part of NUMSA to challenge metal bosses single-handed. This has allowed management to capitalise on the fact that there are different demands proposed by unions, especially those representing black workers."

NUMSA also sees the need for unity. Moses Mayekiso, the general secretary of NUMSA, told the *Labour Bulletin* "we regret that there should be another union cropping up instead of bringing the metal workers together. But we are open to meeting that union to at the end of the day form one metal union in this country."

Raymond Khoza, the newly elected President of MEWUSA, told the *Labour Bulletin* that they were approached by NUMSA at the Industrial Council wage negotiations on the 30 May for a joint caucus. "We (MEWUSA) indicated that we were prepared to have a caucus with NUMSA, but felt it was too late for our members to enter into such an alliance," he said.

Khoza is arguing that is too late to enter into an alliance because several wage talks have already taken place, with employers having made their final offer and unions preparing to declare a dispute. He implies that the absence of unity from the outset would be difficult to resolve at this stage. This argument is a debatable argument.

The two statements suggest that there is a narrowing of differences between the two unions on the question of an alliance during wage negotiations with employers. It remains to be seen how unity will be forged.

### **The IMF alliance broke down in 1988**

When NUMSA pulled out of the IMF alliance in a living wage campaign last year, it was largely on the fact that IMF and NACTU affiliates were incapable of mobilising their members on the shopfloor. Meetings that were called by IMF unions to discuss the workers' wage demands were attended by NUMSA members. It was also NUMSA members who went on strike to pressurise employers to meet their demands.

Some NACTU spokepeople rejected this criticism. But Kodisane told the *Labour Bulletin* "the ignorance that prevailed in SEAWUSA on the question of mergers was also displayed during the industrial council wage negotiations. Members were in the dark. This explains why there was no action taken at the shopfloor by our members during the IMF wage



campaign".

The 1988 alliance of IMF unions is an issue to be subjected to critical discussion if unity between the two unions and other IMF affiliates is to be realised in future. At the present moment both SEA-

WUSA and UAMAWUSA said they needed a chance to establish democratic practices in their unions. MEWUSA has adopted a new structure at the congress. This structure - which is composed of shop steward committees at the local, regional and national level - is meant to facilitate the realisation of worker control and worker democracy, and not leaving behind worker unity.

According to Khoza, the new structure would allow the accommodation of different traditions that are brought by the unions that merged. "Seminars and an extensive educational process is going to be introduced to allow workers to acquaint themselves with these concepts," said Cindi.

The adoption of a new democratic structure is another positive development in the formation of MEWUSA. The importance of democratic union structures is that it instills in shopstewards and members the need to take initiative in their trade union. This is a



*The new union's logo*

long process, which requires patience and a lot of effort from the union organisers. Structures will make it possible for members and shop stewards to discuss important issues like worker unity at all levels of MEWU-

SA.

The other base for unity between NUMSA and MEWUSA is found in the conditions created by the new LRA. Unions have responded to this state onslaught by uniting together under the workers summit to discuss a response. MEWUSA and NUMSA will be able to participate in common campaigns against the labour law, because their respective federations have agreed to co-operate. However, it is at the factory level that unity between the two unions needs to be clearly established.

The formation of MEWUSA has been a positive development in the organisation of metalworkers, particularly in NACTU and generally in the labour movement. It has laid another base for the organisation of the metalworkers in South Africa. However, the bargaining position and political voice of metalworkers will be stronger when all metal unions come under one union, one federation. ☆