



SAMWU

three years on the march

In the past three years the South African Municipal Workers Union has grown to become the biggest public sector union in COSATU. It has notched up considerable success in "combining stop-order quantity with organisational quality" because great emphasis has been laid on solid democratic methods of organisation. JOHN ERNSTZEN, general secretary of SAMWU, reports on the union's progress by early 1991.

SAMWU was born, on 24-25 October 1987, out of a merger between five COSATU affiliates in local government - the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA), the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU), the Municipal Workers Union of SA (MWUSA), the SA Allied Workers Union (SAAWU) and the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU).

Although following the COSATU principle of "one union one industry", the merger was not easily achieved. The five unions had different traditions and different organisational emphases which lead to misunderstandings and tensions. The CTMWA

and TGWU shared a commitment to strong trade union structures. GAWU, MWUSA and SAAWU were more general unions in the mould of the broad militancy of the early 1980's.

Mergers with other local government unions have continued since the launch of SAMWU. In the Cape Province, the Eastern Cape Local Authorities Association was taken into SAMWU's Port Elizabeth Area Council, the Munisipale Werkersvereniging merged with the Boland branch, and the Vredenburg-Saldanha Werkersvereniging went into the West Coast Area Council. A merger with the Western Province Local Authorities Association is being explored. In the Trans-

vaal, the Union of Pretoria Municipal Workers was absorbed into SAMWU's Pretoria Area Council. A merger involving the Durban Integrated Employees' Society (DIMES) is being finalised

Such on-going mergers and strengthening of structures are indications of SAMWU's organisational strength.

Organisational principles

SAMWU's constant and solid growth since its launch is due to the union's implementation of its founding resolutions. These specified the crucial importance of strong and democratic structures as an organisational strategy by which the prin-

ciples of non-racialism, worker control and unity would be secured.

SAMWU's strong commitment to democratic practice meant that union structures - largely under-organised at the time of the launch - were created slowly and painstakingly. It is of little use to the practice of democracy and establishing strong structures if branches and regions are based on fragile foundations.

Stringent requirements were set out by the launching congress regarding the formation of regions. These included allowing both formal and interim shop stewards' committees, Area Councils and Regional Executive Committees. The last-named were to be elected at Regional Congresses at which only formal and interim area councils or branches were represented.

SAMWU aimed for solid, rather than spectacular growth. However, the former has by no means precluded the latter. In 1990, SAMWU was COSATU's fastest-growing affiliate. At the time of its launch, SAMWU's paid-up membership was 14 892. Just over three years later, paid-up membership stands at 58 000 and signed-up membership at over 80 000.

Regional implantation

SAMWU's branches have emerged slowly, only after shop stewards' committees and area councils have proved to be working effectively, both administratively and organisationally. Re-



SAMWU members join in anti-LRA protests

Photo: SAMWU

gions have emerged even more slowly. The Western Cape region, for example, was only launched in 1990, after more than two years of building structures from Plettenberg Bay to the West Coast, and from Paarl to Upington.

Thus far, four regions have been formed: Transvaal, Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Significant progress has been made in the formation of the Orange Free State/Northern Cape region. SAMWU's regions include over 160 municipalities, town councils and Regional Services Councils (RSC's).

Regions are perceived to be necessary co-ordinating structures in the national union - both to promote and maintain the cohesion of workers and to ensure a national perspective. The importance of the latter is evident when it is noted that SAMWU membership varies greatly from one local authority to another.

Regions are expected to meet their own running expenses and are accountable to Regional Congresses. Regional budgets are carefully worked out in relation to national budgets.

National and regional budgets

SAMWU determines its own financial priorities when members approve its national and regional budgets. Within the regions, the needs of each local group of members are considered, as well of those of the region as a whole.

SAMWU is rightly proud that the union became self-sufficient only two years after its launch. The resolution of the launching congress that SAMWU "work towards financial self-sufficiency in all respects" has already been fulfilled as far as running expenses are concerned.

There were enormous difficulties to overcome, not least of which was the uneven level of organisation

SAMWU

at the merger. It was felt at the time that structures could not operate effectively without financial self-sufficiency. Also, the strength of structures was reflected in their capacity for financial management.

SAMWU members, in approving the budget, are determining how members' subscriptions should be used. The decisions of regions and the national union regarding finances are members' decisions. Members can rightly assert that SAMWU is a union of workers, where workers decide how workers' money is to be used for workers' interests.

We must add however, that the rapid growth of the union, the range of COSATU campaigns, and the development of centralised wage bargaining, has compelled SAMWU to send representatives all over the country on many occasions to meet fellow workers and unions. This has created financial problems and will continue to do so. These are being addressed in SAMWU and answers will have to be found.

Difficulties encountered

The growth of SAMWU has not been without difficulties. SAMWU's members are drawn from geographically far-flung workplaces. Their employers are often racist and openly hostile to labour organisation. SAMWU also faces competition organising

in this sector where NACTU's National Union of Public Sector Workers is also active.

Some of the legal/organisational problems encountered related to:

● **Registration** The issue of registration caused considerable controversy during the initial unity talks. Some of the unions were of the view that registration was equivalent to collaboration with the state. However, by SAMWU's launching congress, unions involved with the merger felt this view to be simplistic.

SAMWU decided to become a registered union because of the practical advantages (such as stop-order facilities), and because it had become clear in the early eighties that the militancy of unions was not being curtailed by registration. Instead, workers used the space created by legality to strengthen union structures under worker control.

● **"Variation of scope"** Taking over the CTMWA registration, the new union had to apply for a variation of scope. As a national union, SAMWU's scope would obviously be different to that of the Western Cape-based CTMWA. This is causing problems of legal procedure which the state and local authorities have contrived to exploit. The present impasse regarding variation of scope is more of an irritant than a serious prob-

lem for SAMWU, but, understandably, one which the union hopes to resolve as speedily as possible.

● **Union recognition by local councils** Negotiations for union recognition are not by any means always conducted with self-proclaimed "liberal" city councils. During 1990, SAMWU members in widely-dispersed local authorities were engaged in more than 50 strikes, many of which revolved around recognition of the union. Most strikes were successful in that employers entered into negotiations with SAMWU and recognition agreements were won, or are being negotiated.

● **Right to strike in "essential services"** These strikes must also be seen in the light of the law relating to the prohibition of the right to strike in essential services. SAMWU calls into question the concept of essential services insofar as this concept restricts the rights of workers. The many strikes and work stoppages in 1990 indicate that our members do not recognise the curtailing of their rights. This issue is being taken up by COSATU as well.

Issues taken up

SAMWU is proud to be an affiliate of COSATU, the biggest federation of organised workers in South Africa. As every affiliate of COSATU

knows, affiliation to COSATU carries with it total commitment, both to the federation and to its constituent unions. COSATU expects every union to play its role as a COSATU affiliate.

SAMWU is currently re-evaluating its involvement in COSATU on regional and local levels. The union's participation in COSATU at a national level - NEC's, CEC's and congresses - has been good. SAMWU, however, believes that its participation on other levels can and must be improved. It is continuous participation in COSATU at regional and local levels which will determine COSATU's growth and its leadership of working class struggle in the future.

Broad workers' campaigns

These expectations of COSATU affiliates involve participation in national campaigns. To date, SAMWU has participated fully in the majority of COSATU campaigns, though this has been uneven from region to region.

Participation in broad campaigns affecting all workers - such as the anti-LRA campaign and the Living Wage Campaign - are of inestimable value in deepening workers' awareness of being a class in and for themselves.

Workers engaged - critically engaged - in the Living Wage Campaign learn that there are rights which they can achieve as a class. It is clear that this vital campaign

must be intensified, given the rapidly transforming political situation in the country.

It is surely not without significance that the Workers' Charter Campaign has been so prominent and fruitful, coming as it did after those other campaigns which, in defending the rights of workers, advanced their perceptions as workers.

Public sector campaigns

As a public sector union, SAMWU has conducted campaigns of its own, while also taking part in other "public sector" campaigns.

● **Privatisation** The Anti-Privatisation Campaign is the most immediately vital of these. This concerns the public sector unions probably more than any others, as it is the public sector unions which are most affected by deregulation and privatisation.

SAMWU has been engaged in an Anti-Privatisation Campaign of its own since 1988. It has become very obvious that so crucial an issue will require co-ordinated efforts by unions (and beyond) if privatisation is to be exposed for what it is - an assault on the working class.

SAMWU noted at its Second National Congress (November 10 to 12, 1989) that "We need to unite like never before - not only in SAMWU, but with our comrades in POTWA, SARHWU and NEHAWU to work out a national programme of

action against privatisation. And because privatisation is a threat to the interests of the whole working class COSATU needs to be part of that campaign."

The pattern of privatisation in South Africa has been such that in most local authorities work is contracted out. While restrictions are placed on local authority workers, areas which have been contracted out are subject to no restrictions.

There is a contradiction relating to state involvement: on the one hand, privatisation and deregulation are extolled as the loosening of restrictions and as structural models of the "free enterprise system"; on the other, the state restricts the right of workers to strike.

Unfortunately, our collective efforts have not been as efficient and co-ordinated as they should have. That is why a great deal more attention is being paid to this aspect of our work.

● **Local government restructuring**

There cannot be a democratic South Africa in which rich suburbs exist side by side with poverty-stricken townships.

SAMWU utterly rejects the racist and puppet structures created under the Group Areas Act. SAMWU's objective is "One Non-Racial City, One Non-Racial Municipality".

Residential areas and services should be desegregated at all levels. SAMWU believes this can only be

realised by means of a national solution. This is patently obvious.

Meanwhile, puppet town councils, racially-determined municipalities and RSC's continue to exist - in even less viable forms. Many have collapsed altogether.

SAMWU's approach to this problem is to set up interim structures in every local community. These should be acceptable to the people, should be non-racial, provide services and perform local government functions pending a national solution.

SAMWU does not reserve the right to prescribe what form these interim structures should take. SAMWU is firm in its conviction that interim local government structures should in no way prejudice national solutions. This, after all, is SAMWU's own organising principle.

Political principles

SAMWU bases all its actions and activities on some crucial political principles.

● Political alliances and workers' interests It will be clear from the above that SAMWU is prepared to form alliances with anyone, provided that the independent interests of workers are protected. This is also SAMWU's position regarding political parties and movements. The issue is, however, being discussed *within the union* and by COSATU, and our position is not final.

"The man in the engine room"

John Ernstzen, in his own words, is a union leader who does not want to be "high profile" but "the man in the engine room". From that position he has played a key role in building up the South African Municipal Workers Union. In 1962, at the age of 22, he entered the service of the Cape Town City Council as a labourer in the Parks and Forests Branch and became active in the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (CTMWA). Interviewed in the Labour Bulletin in 1984, John Ernstzen recounted how a progressive group of workers ousted the bureaucratic leadership of the CTMWA in 1964, transforming it into an active democratic and non-racial union responsive to the needs of its members. Elected as shop steward for his work branch and Honorary Secretary of the CTMWA in 1965, Ernstzen went on to work full time for the union, becoming its first full time General Secretary in 1968. In the 1970's, the CTMWA, was joined by the new wave of independent unions. The CTMWA welcomed this development and was active in the unity talks that eventually led to the formation of COSATU in 1985. John Ernstzen was elected onto the first COSATU NEC and CEC in 1985 and, when SAMWU was formed on COSATU instructions in 1987, the CTMWA became a key component of the new union and John Ernstzen its General Secretary. ♦



John Ernstzen

Photo: SAMWU

● Union independence

No member is prevented from belonging to any political organisation of her/his choice. Unions should, however, remain independent of political parties and the state, even a democratic state. Such guidelines provide a basis for dealings with international organisations.

● Democracy Democratic practice has been, and is being, built by worker discussion, decision-making and leadership accountability at every level, from the shop stewards' committee to the

National Congress. SAMWU believes that democracy is being built as the organisation grows and transforms itself.

For SAMWU, the realisation of democracy is uninterrupted by struggle, both within union structures and society as a whole.

When SAMWU included the word "democratise" in its slogan for the Second National Congress, the country was in the grip of a State of Emergency. It was no accident that the Second National Congress adopted the slogan at a time when

democratic practice was made intensely difficult by the repressive machinery of the state.

In this sense, the slogan was a dedication - that unity, organisation and democracy are fought for continuously, achieved with pain and against all odds. Simultaneously, the slogan was a commitment to democratise local authority structures.

Perspectives

For SAMWU, the 1989 Congress slogan "Unite, Organise, Democratise" was realised in practice in 1990. The strikes and work stoppages by SAMWU members proved their confidence, as well as an increasing determination to control their own lives. A highly significant development is that recognition and stop order facilities were gained at seven municipalities in the OFS during January 1991, and many more are being negotiated.

SAMWU is a young union of great vigour and sturdy growth. The union grew by 64 per cent between December 1989 and July 1990, with a further 22 per cent between July and November 1990.

It is the union's pride to reflect on all that has been achieved since October 1987. There have been serious setbacks and great difficulties. There has been hardship, victimisation and retrenchment, but the spirit of SAMWU members is strong.

SAMWU has also striven

to develop a self-critical stance and to learn from its mistakes. At SAMWU's Founding Congress, the union resolved to foster "honesty in expressing our views and ideas within the structure of our organisation, discipline when debating and the democratic right of constructive criticism". SAMWU has, in some measure, achieved these democratic practices.

SAMWU hopes that it will continue to embody the principles of democracy, as resolved at the launching congress, in the next decade of change. It trusts that it will continue to articulate demo-

cratic principles as struggles against privatisation and deregulation intensify, as the battle for a democratic society free of oppression and exploitation takes on new forms.

At all times, the union has sought to promote the interests of its members, organised workers and the working class as a whole. In so doing SAMWU - as a COSATU affiliate - together with other unions and other organisations committed to democracy, will help to create a society in which the "free development of each is the condition for the free development of all". ☆

SAMWU



Congress

by HOWARD GABRIELS*

About 400 delegates from local authorities across the country met at SAMWU's third national congress on 1-2 June 1991 in Cape Town. The theme of the congress was:

**"Our vision ... Socialism:
The road ... Democracy."**

Since its launch in October 1987 SAMWU's

paid-up membership grew from 14 892 to about 62 000. At present the signed-up membership is over 80 000. Because of the union's solid and careful organising style, SAMWU is beginning to mature into a very stable union with strong democratic structures, despite the normal problems of a fast-growing

* Over a period of ten years, former trade unionist Howard Gabriel worked as an organiser in the old General Workers' Union, education officer for NUM, and W Cape regional secretary of SACTWU.

YEAR	MEMBERSHIP
1987	14 892
1989	27 852
1990	45 851
1991	61 893

REGION	1989	1990	1991
W Cape	12 325	14 737	19 122
E Cape	3 010	3 929	8 288
Natal	2 091	10 741	10 873
Transvaal	9 887	15 966	20 546
OFS/NCape	539	478	3 064
TOTAL	27 852	45 851	61 893

union.

The president, Petrus Mashishi, reminded delegates of the last congress theme - 'Unite! Organise! Democratised!' - and thanked delegates for turning that theme into a reality which is evidenced in the growth of SAMWU. The office bearers elected at the congress were Petrus Mashishi as president, Sandile Mqaka as vice president, Sydney Adams as treasurer and John Ernstzen as general secretary.

The congress considered some 27 resolutions on policy. Some key resolutions were:

International affiliation

SAMWU decided to affiliate to the Public Servants International and to strengthen bilateral relations with other PSI affiliates. SAMWU hopes to secure greater facilities within PSI for interaction between unions in the

developing countries in order to build solidarity on a South-South basis.

Women and affirmative action

SAMWU resolved to take "positive action to equip women with the necessary awareness and skills that will build their confidence and enable them to participate fully in the union."

Issues identified as positive action are:

- to set up a National Women's Structure
- education on the real nature of gender oppression
- skills training aimed at women
- addressing practical problems such as child care which inhibit women from participating in union structures.

Political Policy

SAMWU supported the call for an interim government

and for a constituent assembly to draw up a new democratic constitution. The adoption of the constitution should be through democratic mass conferences and referendums. SAMWU fully endorses the call for the inclusion of basic worker rights in the constitution, in particular rights for public sector workers. To this end the resolution provided for the union to inform its political allies of its demands.

Local government restructuring

SAMWU has established a research group on local government restructuring and resolved to embark on an education programme on this issue. The union is clearly grappling with the dilemma that local initiatives are taking place in the absence of national guidelines having been established. It will be seeking to co-operate with its allies in the civics who are involved in negotiations with local authorities (see Erenstzen, p 33).

Industrial Action

In the past year SAMWU members were involved in over 50 major strikes. These strikes are particularly significant because municipal workers are employed in what are classified as essential services and therefore cannot strike legally. The strikes were primarily sparked by three issues:

1 Wages By far the biggest strikes were about wages and



SAMWU Congress 1991

Photo: SAMWU

conditions of employment. A large number of workers embarked on militant actions such as the strikes by 10 000 Cape Town City Council workers, 12 000 in Durban and 3 200 in Port Elizabeth. Significant progress appears to have been made in SAMWU's living wage campaign. Ernstzen says that wage negotiations were co-ordinated by the Special National General Council held in November 1990.

2 Recognition and

Stop Orders At present there is a big difference between paid-up and signed-up members because municipalities are reluctant to formally recognise SAMWU. The position is aggravated by the state's refusal to vary the scope of registration of the union because of objections by the all-white SAAME. A number of strikes occurred over both stop order facilities and recognition.

3 Political Demands One of the most significant strikes by SAMWU was at Lingeletu West (Khayelitsha) where 800 workers demanded the resignation of councillors. There were about six other strikes over the same issue in other parts of the country. The strike lasted for a month (14 November to 14 December 1990). Significant in the strike was the co-operation between SAMWU and the ANC.

One big public sector union?

According to sources the question of a single public sector union is a subject of serious debate within SAMWU and COSATU. However, this was not discussed at the congress.

COSATU's public sector unions (SAMWU, NEHAWU, SARHWU, POTWA) have experienced a wave of militant action over the last two years, and a

rapid growth in membership. They are battling to consolidate their structures, and it may make more sense for them to combine resources. Also, there is no affiliate which organises the vast civil service bureaucracy, and a single large union could facilitate this. If a merger were to happen SAMWU, as the biggest union in this sector and the one with strongest union structures, would no doubt serve as the core of a public sector super-union. Workers in this sector could be greatly strengthened.

Collective bargaining

In the past six months SAMWU has joined industrial councils in the Transvaal, Natal and the Cape. Most of the local authorities are members. In Natal and Transvaal the Municipal Employers Organisation negotiates on behalf of the local authorities and in the Cape the Cape Province Local Authority Employers Organisation negotiates on behalf of 112 local authorities.

These industrial councils have registered constitutions although the agreements are unpublished. The big cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town are not party to the provincial industrial councils, and either have their own in-house industrial councils or do not have industrial councils. ☆