

The Struggle for Trade Union Democracy: The Case of the JMCEU

The attempt to wrest control from the conservative leadership of the Johannesburg Municipal Combined Employees Union focused attention, once again, on the position of workers in TUCSA unions. Although this article will deal with issues associated with state sector workers, the primary focus will be on the organising strategy of the group of workers who attempted to democratise the union. The article will concentrate on the context of this struggle, the demands of the reform group, and conservative leadership's response to this initiative.

The union operates within the Johannesburg Municipality, and by virtue of a closed shop agreement, represents all Indian and Coloured workers in the employ of the Johannesburg City Council (JCC), except for a minority of workers in the transport department. Other unions such as the Johannesburg Municipal Employees Association represent white workers; while the majority of the African workers are either unorganised, belong to the unrecognised Municipal and General Workers Union, or are members of the recognised, but conservative, Union of Johannesburg Municipal Workers.

JMCEU was largely the invention of the JCC which felt the need to negotiate conditions of employment through a union. Thus, in 1961, certain employees were approached and steps were taken to form a union. Under the leadership of these founder members, the union served to perform little more than implement the decisions of management. This situation changed somewhat when, in 1971, George Huntley and Dennis Venter took control of the union. This new leadership saw a change in the union's dealings with the City Council. Whereas, in the past, the union simply accepted everything that the JCC decided, the union was now actually involved in negotiations over wages, grading and other conditions of employment. Racism too became a bone of contention. These changes, however significant, should not be taken out of context. With increasing worker militancy in the country, and changes in the industrial laws, the JCC was quite open to introducing changes designed to secure industrial peace, and which were

in any event becoming commonplace. Thus, for example, in 1980 salary and grading structures were integrated, using the Paterson system, into a unitary ("non-racial") system.

Union structure and lack of democratic control

Several factors influenced the modus operandi of the union:

- 1) The majority of the union's leadership occupied managerial positions.
- 2) The lack of an organic link between the executive and the broader membership.
- 3) The almost equal distribution of blue collar and white collar members.
- 4) The fact that the membership were relatively unexposed to an alternative kind of trade unionism.

The failure to mobilise its membership limited the union's ability to press its demands in negotiations. The only option open to the union for applying pressure on the JCC was legal (conciliation board) action, a threat the union successfully used in 1974 around a wage negotiation.

Possibly the most conspicuous contradiction in the JMCEU was the position of George Huntley and Dennis Venter (Venter resigned in 1982). These two men alternated the positions of chairman and vice-chairman between them. Both had worked their way up to the position of township officer, a job which placed them in control of literally hundreds of workers, who were also members of the union. Huntley claimed that when he negotiated on behalf of the union he abandoned his ties with the JCC and conducted himself in the interests of the union. This conflict of interests often manifested itself and a good example occurred at the 1984 AQM when, in justifying a meagre increase that the union had agreed to, Huntley argued that JCC had a budget and could not be expected to spend more than this budget allowed. A more stark example of such conflict occurred when Huntley, in his capacity as township officer having to discipline a worker, had to ask another executive member to defend the worker. On another level, having to relate to the union's leadership as their bosses for the better part of the working day made it impossible for the vast majority of workers, blue collar workers especially, to perceive the union leadership as equals and fellow members. It therefore comes as no surprise that some workers

failed to distinguish between the union and the council.

The wide gap existing between the executive and the membership extended beyond the personal traits of individuals on the executive, and manifested itself in a more general alienation of the membership, typical of many TUCSA unions. Apart from the few individual grievances which found their way to the secretary's desk, the only other form of consultation that existed was the AGM. The AGMs, however, served as a poor example of democracy. Almost year in and year out, these meetings served only three purposes: adoption of minutes, acceptance of the proposed budget and election of the executive. The number of candidates nominated for election was, until 1980, usually just sufficient to fill the executive positions available. This fact clearly underlines the alienation of executive from membership, and also explains why Huntley and Venter were allowed to dominate for such a long time. The overall effect of this state of affairs was that the executive could frequently make decisions without a mandate, and almost certainly gain ratification for their actions at the following AGM.

This situation created a bureaucracy which was particularly alien to blue collar workers. The distinction between blue and white collar workers has serious implications for any grouping trying to oppose the current leadership and nurture an alternative type of trade unionism. Probably because of the very nature of municipalities, workers from a broad spectrum of occupations are thrown into one trade union. In the case of JMCEU, with its Indian and Coloured membership, there exists an almost equal number of blue collar and white collar workers. It is no secret that the white collar workers often see themselves as being above blue collar workers. Moreover there exist real differences in priorities between blue and white collar workers. Also, the rigid and formal meeting procedure and language tended to alienate blue collar workers particularly. In the absence of a serious union education programme and a more flexible attitude towards different categories of workers, the union continues to play more of a controlling role in the lives of blue collar workers. Under these circumstances it is not surprising to find that workers, whose wages border on the fringes of subsistence, find themselves giving approval to the executive's requests for unwarranted subscription increases, land speculation (at a

price of R50,000), a secretary's salary of R18,000 per annum, and the purchase of furniture befitting a thriving business venture rather than a union comprising 800 members.

A service organisation?

The union does perform certain services, amongst which the most prominent are the provision of burial insurance, a nominal death insurance, a loan scheme and assistance in solving individual disputes. The most controversial of these is the loan scheme. While offering a service, by its very nature, it is available mostly to members in the upper income bracket, those whose salaries ensure expedient repayment, rather than those most in need of loans.

Insofar as the handling of individual disputes is concerned, Huntley has repeatedly stated that the executive can only act on grievances that are brought before it. Even then assistance is not guaranteed. In 1983 a group of traffic officers were refused any assistance from Huntley, after being told by management to resign for allegedly having received bribes. In this instance all the traffic officers chose to resign as the best course of action. The union, without investigating the case at all, refused to defend the members concerned at a disciplinary hearing. One other example concerning a reform group member will be discussed below.

This being the state of affairs in the union, it will come as no surprise to find that, in 1980 when BMWU (Black Municipal Workers Union) went out on strike, the JMCEU did not offer the slightest support. Indeed workers in the housing department, following the example of the JMCEU leaders, actually scabbed. This act precipitated the formation of a "reform group" and led to a number of attempts to oust the leadership of the union.

The 1980 BMWU strike

Previously, although there was discontent, this was never constituted into a more organised effort to reform the union. The secretary, Monty Narsoo, did attempt to get individuals to participate in the union and some even participated in the executive. The 1980 BMWU strike, and the fact that the the union encouraged its members to scab, brought together

the secretary and a group of dissident workers, almost entirely from the library department. This group submitted a petition calling on the chairman to resign in view of his role in the strike. The inexperience of the group was indicated by the fact that they gave the petition to the press a few hours before the executive received it. This was to provide Huntly with a great deal of ammunition with which to blast the group at subsequent AGMs. Of more significance is the fact that little contact had been made with the broader membership. The end result was that the group raised the issue of the union's role in the strike at a poorly attended AGM. The majority of the members present did not feel strongly on the issue, and at the end of the day only two, of the four people from the reform group who had stood for election, ended up on an executive committee, in which very little could be achieved.

The reform group never really consolidated itself as an opposition group at AGMs and failed at a more fundamental level to forge sufficient links with the members in general. The 1981 AGM saw a few individuals from the group once again elected onto the executive, while the group basically ceased to exist, as such, up until about April the following year, when attempts were once again made to reorganise the group. During this lull, Monty Narsoo had resigned as secretary of the union and was detained for eight months. This, along with the handling of the BMWU issue helped Huntley to label the group as "political". This factor was significant in determining the limits to the support the group could expect to establish amongst the white collar workers, many of whom were not prepared to involve themselves in anything as dangerous as politics.

The 1982 AGM

From about April 1982 attempts were made to get together all people who were dissatisfied with the union leadership. The process was tedious with problems of providing transport for workers distributed over a large area. Nevertheless several new people were brought into the group: individuals from the housing department (the largest concentration of members), the health department, the meter readers, in addition to the librarians who had remained the dominant part of the group. Significantly, some blue collar workers were brought in and

nominated as candidates.

In an attempt to project the group amongst workers, a letter was written by Terry Jeevanantham which highlighted some of the problems that workers, particularly blue collar workers, had with the union. This was distributed by the reform group. While the majority of blue collar workers saw the letter as confirmation of their feelings, a large group of workers, notably, nurses and some in the housing department, saw the letter as an attempt to cause trouble in a union that had otherwise been quite peaceful and happy. The letter nevertheless did serve its purpose in creating links with the most exploited section of the membership, who certainly construed the letter as an expression of their own grievances.

Apart from the letter attempts were made to popularise the reform candidates for the executive elections. Workers were addressed at various centres, and at their homes, where the group's manifesto was discussed. This course of action forced Huntley, for once, to go around from centre to centre addressing workers too. In addition the executive mandated Huntley to write and distribute a response to Terry Jeevanantham's letter. This proved to be libelous, for which Huntley was later to apologise to Mr Jeevanantham. Preparations for the AGM, although not in the end sufficient to oust Huntley and his supporters, created the atmosphere for one of the liveliest AGMs in the union's history. The reform group had prepared several issues to highlight at the AGM: the union's proposed property investment, increased subscriptions, the lavish farewell party for Venter who had resigned some months earlier, and the purchase of expensive office furniture.

Although these issues had support amongst the majority of blue collar workers, who were the support base of the reform group, the dynamics of a formal AGM did much to undermine this support. Huntley, in spite of varied and concerted attacks, was in a position to prevent people from having their say; even threatening to throw people out of the meeting if they persisted in trying to speak. The attacks by the reformers were received in two ways: the daily paid workers revelled in the attacks; but it would seem that a considerable faction of the white collar workers were indeed won over by talk of investment in property and the establishment of a posh union office.

The 1982 AGM showed the limitations of trying to win control of the union simply through the AGM. When the reform group addressed the blue collar workers in smaller groups, they showed a clear understanding of the issues, and also an obvious dislike for Huntley, yet at the AGM many would vote in favour of motions proposed by Huntley or his supporters. This phenomenon can be explained in terms of the alienating ritual of the AGM and because of the limited contact between the reform group and the blue collar workers. While such contact certainly went well beyond what the union leadership had ever embarked on, the reformers seemed to have had difficulty in meeting with blue collar workers on a regular basis. The result was that the kind of unity needed to sustain a bid to take over the union was never built to a sufficient level. When it came to the ballot, charismatic personalities rather than the issues decided matters.

Evenso, at the end of the day, the reformers secured five of the ten executive positions, Huntley being re-elected as chairperson. This meant that the reform group was technically in "control" of the union, since the chairperson had only a casting vote. However, the reform group did not mobilise to defend their gains, and were systematically out-maneuvered. The efforts of the conservatives to regain control of the executive reached outrageous proportions when the votes were privately (and unconstitutionally) "recounted" in an attempt to oust one of the reform members from the executive. The ensuing legal battle, however, ruled in favour of the reformers. This victory, important though it was, did not mean that control of the executive was in the hands of the reformers. On the contrary, by virtue of Terry Jeevanantham's suspension (for the letter he distributed) the first, and indeed, the most crucial executive meeting saw the reformers in a minority. Terry Jeevanantham's re-instatement as a member of the union did not prevent the continued dominance of Huntley at executive meetings. The inexperience of the reform group was felt, more than ever, around the boardroom table, where they were almost totally, and quite often unconstitutionally out-maneuvered. In the end a major setback occurred when the City Council terminated the contract of one of the reform members on the executive, Ms Gail Adonis. The executive, under the chairmanship of Huntley, refused to assist Ms Adonis. With the termination of her contract she was no longer considered a union member. Huntley's major objection

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co assisting Gail was that she "refused to greet him". The conservatives eventually gained a majority and it became impossible to sustain the program for change that the reformers had outlined. Within the reform group matters seemed to have reached a dead end; people lost enthusiasm and there was a general lack of consistency which plagued the group from that point on.

The period 1983-84

The reform group continued to contest elections on a somewhat smaller scale. Campaigning efforts scarcely took on the proportions displayed around the 1982 AGM. In fact, the group basically only constituted itself around the AGMs, instead of consistently strengthening links with the membership as a whole. The outcome of the AGMs subsequent to 1982, predictably, showed a progressive strengthening of the position of the conservatives again. The 1984 AGM in fact saw the conservatives re-establish total control of the executive.

An Assessment

In trying to assess the failure of the reform group to oust the conservative leadership the following points need to be made:

- The enormous diversity of the workforce in terms of skill occupations and locality.
- The fact that the leadership of the union was primarily middle management, and unskilled workers tended to be intimidated by this. Additionally the leadership received support from white collar workers who benefited most from the services and benefits provided by the union. A further factor is that white collar workers in the state sector are seen to be carrying out state policy. They tend to be alienated from their communities and therefore more conservative.
- Because of their status as middle management, the leadership are closely linked with the employers, and it appears co-operate closely with the Municipality.
- The inexperience and youth of a large proportion of the reform group acted against them; both in terms of how the older workers saw them, and in their inability to counter some of the manoeuvres of the union leadership.
- The campaigns were largely issue-bound, directed towards

the elections, and no sustained alternative organisation was developed.

- The resources of the reform group were extremely limited.
- The undemocratic way the union was structured and the manipulation of these structures and meetings was extremely difficult to counter, particularly given the general apathy of workers in bureaucratic unions. This was somewhat countered by the courts and by press publicity.
- The harassment of reform group members and the shenanigans of the union leadership lowered the morale of the group and its ability to oust the conservative leadership.

Despite its failure, the reform group displayed a great deal of resourcefulness and creativity. In a hostile terrain, and with limited resources, it showed the resilience to continue fighting over a period of 4 years. It forced the conservative leadership to be more accountable and to be more aware of workers' grievances. It also showed members that the leadership can be challenged and rattled, and this alone probably vindicates its decision to work within the union. The lessons learnt during this period will, no doubt, inform struggles yet to come.

(SALB Correspondent, March 1985)