



INTERVIEW

JOHANN DU PLESSIS, president of
FEDSAL and DANNHAUSER VAN DER
MERWE, general secretary of the
organisation speak to Karl von
Holdt and Snuki Zikalala.

FEDSAL:

the moderate voice of labour

Could you give us a picture of FEDSAL?

FEDSAL has 270 000 members in 17 unions. We are seen to be a white-collar federation only, but in fact we represent thousands of blue-collar members as well. It is people coming together with the same ideology, feeling comfortable together.

FEDSAL was dormant for quite a long time and it was only in 1985 that FEDSAL was resuscitated. From then it grew dramatically until now. Our members are 70% white and about 30% black. That is not because of policy, but because of the composition of its affiliates. History is also a factor. Unions were forced to be segregated and quite a few of our unions come from the olden days – 70 or 80 years ago.

FEDSAL tries to be the moderate voice of labour. People did not feel comfortable with the militancy of COSATU although we understand the reasons for it. People wanted a moderate house. And very important, we are apolitical which ensures our total independence in thought and action.

We are receiving quite a few enquiries from

unions interested in joining FEDSAL. Several organisations have just joined (see table on p63) and others are making enquiries.

The federation is mostly white-collar but about 20% of our members are blue-collar workers.

How do you define white-collar workers?

White-collar workers are people in administration, sales and similar positions. In many cases we are representative of members in relatively senior positions, for example sales managers and bank managers.

Where do you see FEDSAL going in the changing South Africa and the new South Africa?

There could in future be a realignment within the labour movement. As the need for political participation diminishes FEDSAL could well act as a facilitator towards achieving greater co-operations amongst the major labour role players. We already co-operate within forums such as the NMC and NEF.

Do FEDSAL affiliates have black organisers?

Yes we do. Sometimes it is very interesting - for example in the banking sector an assistant manager may call us for help. When the organiser arrives he is black person. We do have them and they service everyone. Where black organisers do help is with blue-collar workers who do not speak English or Afrikaans and feel more confident with their own language.

COSATU is now proposing the idea of a reconstruction accord endorsed by itself, the ANC, community organisations etc. This will ensure the ANC develops social and economic policies that meet labour's needs - job creation, houses, training. Would FEDSAL as a labour organisation be interested in participating in the reconstruction accord?

No, because of the involvement of a political grouping - assuming the ANC has not yet registered as a political party! Whilst the politicians are at the table we would not feel comfortable participating.

One could foresee all labour organisations discussing and adopting a common position, and taking it to the government of the day?

I do not see why that is not possible in the future. We may be forced to come closer together. We differ at this stage in our policies and ideologies.

In a nutshell, what are the major areas of agreements and differences between FEDSAL and COSATU?

The main differences are COSATU's participation in politics; COSATU's declared policy of one industry one union, and one country one federation; and economic policy. Our major areas of agreement are our joint concern about trade union and worker rights in a new South Africa; labour issues affecting workers across the spectrum; consumer issues such as VAT; the eradication of corruption in

the public service, and a government which is clear, transparent and accountable to the people; and economic growth and job creation.

What is FEDSAL's relation with the Federation of Independent Trade Unions (FITU) and the Confederation of Metal and Building Unions (CMBU)? They are also a moderate voice of labour.

Our relations with FITU are cordial, and tentative steps have been taken to co-operate on issues of mutual interests. For example, we are together in the NMC.

Our relations with the Confederation of Labour and the CMBU can at best be described as non-existent on a formal level. We made approached to bring the CMBU and FEDSAL together, but unfortunately did not succeed.

You say FEDSAL is in the middle. Two things can happen - the middle can become smaller as members leave to the left and the right, or the middle can grow. What is the future of FEDSAL? Will it remain a predominantly white, white-collar federation?

Our objective is for FEDSAL to grow to its maximum potential. FEDSAL's racial composition will always be determined by the composition of its member unions. As we are a non racial organisation open to both white-collar and blue-collar workers the questions becomes irrelevant. Race plays no role in FEDSAL and for that reason we are not in the least concerned about the racial composition of our membership. What is of great importance is to represent like-minded people. You can't be everything to everybody. TUCSA tried to do that and went under.

Is there any likelihood of a merger with COSATU?

I do not foresee that.

What does FEDSAL see as major issues at the NMC?

The process of commenting on labour legislation and labour issues on an on-going



Johann du Plessis

Photo: William Matlala

basis. Secondly, the redrafting of the Labour Relations Act. Thirdly, establishing a union scope of application of the Unemployment Insurance Fund, Workmen's Compensation Act and Basic Conditions of Employment Act. We want to see the NMC develop into the most important and respected labour forum in the country. It has still got a long way to go – the new format is only starting to function now.

In relation to the LRA, we would like to see simplified procedures in general and dispute procedures in particular, as well as a clearer definition of unfair labour practices. When unfair labour practices were first codified in the 1988 amendments we were quite apprehensive, but the codification worked quite well. Now that the earlier situation has been restored one is almost forced to test everything in court.

We also believe the Industrial Court rules are too complex. Unless a worker has an attorney or union, he has no hope of finding his way through.

What is FEDSAL's role in the NEF?

FEDSAL must bring its influence to bear at meetings of the NEF. In order to do this successfully, we are at present working on proposals for economic policy. Once this task has been completed, it will not only be submitted to the NEF, but also serve as the basis for our participation in meetings of the NEF.

Is it true that COSATU is leading the way on labour issues?

COSATU is in fact playing a leading role on labour issues. The fact that COSATU has a formidable infrastructure and other resources at its disposal enables it to play its present role effectively. We are quite happy to give credit for the role they play. But we also raise issues. For example we were the first to raise the issue of VAT on union dues. We have also raised the issue of the government's proposed tax on pension fund contributions and we managed to stop that.

When you talk about FEDSAL being a moderate voice of labour what does that mean?

We are clearly perceived to be moderate in relation to those federations which participate in party political activity. Our particular image therefore stems from the fact that we restrict ourselves to purely economic, labour and consumer issues. That does not mean that we will not use every means at our disposal to advance the interests of our members. Our style is one of negotiation rather than one of mass action, hence the reference to our moderate voice.

You say that FEDSAL is not opposed to striking in principle. Do your affiliates ever use industrial action?

Our unions all support the right to strike and believe it should be used if necessary, and it has been used as a weapon in the past, the recent SABC debacle being a case in point. Another example is that during 1990 the administrative staff at the airport closed down the tills. This stoppage was quite effective – it was settled quickly.

We also use the press quite effectively. For example, our members at Bankorp, just before the formation of ABSA, had a problem with retrenchments. The main problem was the lack of consultation, and the manner of retrenching. Office people are very secure and you can imagine the shock when someone suddenly gets a letter saying he or she is retrenched. FEDSAL went to press on the issue and had

very good results – they got a better retrenchment package and retrenchment procedure.

What is the structure of FEDSAL?

Our administrative component is much smaller than the other federations – a general secretary and an administrator. Our policy-making body is the National Executive Committee (NEC) which meets once a month with a representative from each affiliate. We have a National conference once a year where the president and vice-president are elected. We rely very much on the support of the office-bearers. We have discussions and distribute tasks.

Do you have any regional structures?

Not at this stage, but we have appointed some people to help out in the regions. They would be officials of our member unions who would carry out various tasks for FEDSAL as well.

The day to day work of our affiliates is to represent their members, take up court cases, to run and lease their buildings, administer medical aid. Members often phone in with problems. A lot of unions are overloaded with cases.

To be blunt the unions have more money than FEDSAL. The members of the NEC of FEDSAL – 18 people – are at our disposal to help. The experience lies around the table.

If FEDSAL is to become more powerful as an organisation does it not need more money from the affiliates?

That is right.

What is the role of FEDSAL in relation to its affiliates?

FEDSAL provides a platform for the individual unions. There is power in numbers, so if the unions want to take up a matter with the minister, FEDSAL can do it. The unions in FEDSAL also share a lot of information on how to run a union, on admin issues and on worker issues. We do not have a researcher. We help each other with new ideas – it is like a family business. We arrange seminars through FEDSAL, invite overseas visitors through FEDSAL and people make contacts. The



Dannhauser van der Merwe

Photo: William Matlala

aspect that could be developed is research but that takes money and we do the best with what we have.

FEDSAL is the moderate voice that people wanted to hear. At one stage we were seen as just opposing COSATU because of our views on the economy and mass stayaways. But our aim is not to go out and differ with them. We are seeing each other more often than before. We want to agree as far as possible. Politics and ideology are where we differ. FEDSAL is orientated towards the free market economy, but while we do not want to change the system, we want to improve it.

What is the future of relations between black and white workers? What is the role of FEDSAL in this, and in particular how do you see affirmative action?

It can be difficult. At federation level you see each other and speak to each other – but at the ground level you might still get differences. For example in Transnet there was a SARHWU strike, in Bloemfontein. They got very militant and even attacked some of our members. Most of our members are still whites in Transnet. It was a colour issue. The Artisan Staff Association and SARHWU had to sign an agreement that we are all workers – let us not fight each other. We had to agree that we should not use violence against each other.

Things like that can affect working relations.

The future relations between black and white workers will be no different than the general relations between all the peoples of this country. That will by and large be determined by progress in the political arena. FEDSAL tries to ignore colour.

Affirmative action has an impact on two

parties – the one at the bottom who is coming up, and the one at the top who is being moved aside. FEDSAL has both black and white members so it will be affected. We will play a role in finding solutions that are as harmonious as possible and are reasonable for all. We believe affirmative action should be based on merit rather than simply on colour. ☆

Broadcasting staff strike for the first time ever

The SABC, with 5 500 full-time employees and about 20 000 freelancers, has at least five unions trying to organise its members. These include the all-white Mineworkers Union (tiny), the Pretoria-based Media and Allied Workers Union (tiny), the SA Union of Journalists (150), the Media Workers Association of SA (950) and the SA Broadcasting Staff Association (1 800).

SABSA, which recently affiliated to the Federation of SA Labour (FEDSAL), is the oldest and biggest of the SABC's unions. It is almost entirely white and has technical and administrative staff as its members as well as a handful of journalists. For the first time in its 40 year history, it took industrial action last month and forced SABC to slightly improve its wage offer (from 7,5% to 7,56%) and to grant a performance based merit increase (for 30% of SABSA members equivalent to 1,1% of the total SABSA wage bill), as well as a once off non-pensionable cash bonus of three days pay, before the parties settled. SABSA members will not be paid for the days they took industrial action.

The SABSA action was limited, but because of the strategic location of some of its members it was potentially highly effective. A single member in a well-placed technical job could disrupt a programme by refusing to work, for example. However, SABSA leadership undermined the effectiveness of those actions its members did take by agreeing from the outset to warn management of where it would be taking action. So, for example, SABC was able to

replace the 40 SABSA members who refused to work on the filming of the Comrades Marathon without too much trouble.

What was interesting about the dispute was that SABC management seemed determined to try and smash the action from the outset. It took the highly unusual step of locking out SABSA members (after over 70% had voted in favour of industrial action) and withholding their May salary packages in an effort to compel them to work on SABC's terms. This had the combined effect of causing a number of SABSA members to resign (sources say about 200 left the union during the strike) and hardening the determination of another faction to continue their selective actions. SABC management (who are currently enjoying a honeymoon relationship with MWASA's leadership since last year's strike) were especially contemptuous of SABSA during the whole dispute and seemed not to believe that it would end in industrial action.

The fact that the action, limited though it was, resulted in SABC upping its offer indicates that it must have had some impact on SABC operations. Although unions like SAUJ pledged solidarity with SABSA, and refused to do their work, there was no joint planning with other unions in the SABC around the action. In fact relations between SABSA and MWASA are hostile with some MWASA members openly indicating their willingness to scab on SABSA because of SABSA's opposition to MWASA's strike last year. ◆