



# Fighting factionalism in the Western Cape

*GLEND A DANIELS spoke to Cosatu unionists in the Western Cape, and found that, although impressive gains have been made over the past few years, much needs to be done to overcome intolerance and divisions before the region can operate effectively*

**W**hile the Cosatu-Western Cape region has grown to 14 affiliates and 139 000 paid up members, it is considered by many to be one of the weaker regions of Cosatu. The region is riddled with ideological conflict and has an unsatisfactory record of democratic practice. Some unionists deny that these divisions are crucial, while others place it at the centre of an understanding of the region's organisational problems.

## **Ideological conflict?**

To date one of the most serious problems in the Western Cape has been the conflict in the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) (see WIP 72). The problem in Fawu, according to Cosatu regional secretary Lucy Nyembe, is 'now resolved'. But according to former Fawu general secretary Jan Theron, who was centrally involved in the conflict, it is far from resolved. He feels that in fact the situation has worsened. In his opinion, those that say the issue has been resolved actually mean that one faction has won - and so criticism will continue to be repressed.

Nyembe says it was an 'ugly issue' and it is a relief that 'it is now over'.

For Theron the only way to resolve the many difficulties in the Western Cape is to admit that these exist in the first place. It would appear that unionists in the region are over-sensitive and find it very difficult to face the problems.

The set-backs in the region are peculiar to the Cape only, according to Sactwu's Enrico Fourie, who is on the Cosatu Regional Executive Committee (REC). He denies that ideological factors are crucial: 'factionalism has always been over-emphasised, and is not the key reason for organisational difficulties. The ideological divisions are among the activists only.'

But surely it is the activists that do the work and the work is hindered by constant ideological squabbles and factions?

'No, this is too simplistic an understanding by far,' Fourie maintains.

In support of Fourie's view, Nyembe asserts that ideological debates relating to 'workerism', 'trotskyism' and 'stalinism' are confined to middle class intellectuals and students, and has only in a limited way 'reared its ugly head' in the union movement.

Theron disagrees strongly, saying that in fact political fighting in the Cape cuts across class barriers and exists in all organisations, and is very evident in unions.



## Coloured identity

Fourie feels that there have been 'certain historical factors' which have contributed to organisational difficulties. In his opinion, Western Cape unionists have had to deal with an all-pervading 'coloured' identity. While mass organisations have had credibility and legitimacy, he feels this has not translated into organisational practice and support.

The coloured community, says Fourie, does not have a binding cohesiveness, like the african community, and this is partly due to the fact that they were relocated time and time again. In addition, he feels that the coloured labour preference policy contributed to alienating coloured people from politics.

'The forced removals and dislocations, instead of bringing the communities closer together, have actually created further divisions and dislocations, creating very different cultures within that race group. These issues served to make Cosatu weak in the Western Cape,' says Fourie.

This happened not just with Cosatu, but with all organisations. 'We won't for example get the same level of support that Port Elizabeth would get if we called for a stayaway.' He also feels that the lack of african leadership in the region is a problem.

## Enormous strides

Fourie argues that organisational tasks and campaigns continue even though debate happens. He feels that Cosatu Western Cape has made enormous strides over the last few years by drawing previously conservative unions into the federation. This has been one of the most important achievements in Cosatu since 1987. For example, ex-Tucsa unions in the garment and liquor sectors have now joined the federation. In previous years the democratic movement tried to win over these unions without success.

Cosatu was able to do this by showing them the validity of certain campaigns, especially the Living Wage Campaign. Now Cosatu is dominant in the Western Cape, with very few unions outside it. One of the last bastions, the Typographical Union, recently disbanded. The demise of conservative unions has at last brought african, coloured and indian workers closer together.

Cosatu at its inception in the Western Cape was not a force to reckon with as the United Democratic Front (UDF) was, but is now regarded as an equal partner with other major progressive bodies, says Fourie. He adds: 'The labour movement



**'Issues of democracy and worker control are not just issues for Fawu, but for all unions and organisations'**  
— Lucy Nyembe

has historically always been weak in this region, but recently it has actually taken major leaps forward and it is not as weak as it was'.

## Problems in the region

Theron is not as enthusiastic as Fourie about Cosatu in the Western Cape.

Like other unionists, who would not be named, Theron said there were problems and complaints that the REC did not meet as often as it should. One unionist said there was poor co-ordination and when meetings did happen, few unions attended. 'This is a major problem, there is little communication between us and the region.'

Theron feels that one had to be honest about these problems and should not gloss over them. He says that the situation in Saldana Bay is a real indictment on Fawu: 'Sea Harvest and Saldana Bay used to be amongst the most militant unions where workers organised, now these workers have been co-opted and there are now company committees there instead of unions. It is an indictment on Fawu, what are they doing about the situation? There is a lot of laziness in the unions.'

Nyembe emphatically disputes the allegation that the Western Cape is the weakest region in Cosatu: 'No, it is definitely not the weakest region, our region was not mentioned in the last congress as among the regions that needed urgent attention'. But she admits that there were many difficulties in organising, and that historically the region has been weak.

'The labour movement only got off its feet after the formation of Cosatu', she said. The major affiliates, like Numsa and Sactwu, only really got started in the Western Cape in 1987. The South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) only established a region in 1990, whereas previously it was only a Cape Town branch.

Nyembe feels that Cosatu has gone through a turbulent period recently, especially with Fawu, whose internal problems affected its ability to contribute to the region. But 'issues of democracy and worker control are not just issues for Fawu but for all unions and organisations', she says. Other unions are small and struggling to build themselves. These include the public sector unions, whose obstacles have been privatisation and labour legislation. Many of these unions suffered from not having stop-order facilities — for instance the South African Railways and Harbours Workers' Union (Sarhwu) only acquired these facilities last year.

'The problem has also been the fact that different unions, because of their unequal resources, do not have the same ability to respond to campaigns, like the living wage campaign and the workers charter campaign', says Nyembe.

Nyembe says she is concerned about the level of democracy, or the quality of democracy in Cosatu and in different unions. There has to be a system where all levels of the unions are involved in decision- and policy-making:

'Democracy would have to be deepened at different levels. And better communication channels need to be set up. We are to have a range of workshops on the issue of democracy, not democracy per se but related to an issue. We don't want the situation where it is only the larger unions that make decisions and only officials that make policy.'

## Campaigns

But the Western Cape clearly has the capacity to rise to the challenge, as the response to the Labour Relations Amendment Bill demonstrates. Unions have largely been fighting problems they face



in their own industries, like retrenchments, which is currently a major problem in the Cape.

Last year refuse workers organised under Samwu had an enormously successful strike which lasted for a month. The demands were for a better working environment and for resignation of the *Khayelitsha town councillor*. There was a general upsurge in the public sector last year, with health workers and House of Representative workers all taking industrial action over wages.

According to Nyembe: 'We are now reaching a stage in Cosatu where we are rationalising our campaigns. They have to be more focused and strike more of a balance between general workers rights, the political scenario and economic rights. At the last conference Cosatu adopted a campaign against retrenchments and for job creation. In the Western Cape this is particularly important because of the lack of industry.'

Nyembe concedes that campaigns in the Western Cape have not all been successful. Whereas in the Transvaal unions are making progress in the **organisation of women**, in the Western Cape this is not the case. According to her even Sactwu, which has a predominantly female membership, has no women's forum.

Sactwu organiser Preggs Govender explains: 'It was raised as an issue some time ago but not recently - there has been no clarity on whether there should be a women's forum. But soon Sactwu will be embarking on two campaigns, health and safety and childcare, which will have important implications for women.'

Cosatu decided at its last congress to take affirmative action for women. Nyembe is encouraged by the fact that when this is raised in the unions, it meets with no resistance.

The **Living Wage Campaign** was taken up more as a Cosatu campaign rather than with individual unions. 'The issue in individual unions arose during times of strikes. Each union must come up with their own minimum wage. The concept of a general minimum wage is not a useful one, as we are dealing with very different industries and unions' comments Nyembe.

The minimum wage issue has caused much controversy in recent months. She also feels that 'unions should also consider specific times of the year for bargaining as this strengthens the unions and Cosatu.'

The **Workers Charter Campaign** became a priority campaign only in cer-

tain unions, according to Nyembe: 'We had discussions groups around the issue but unfortunately it very quickly moved into a discussion of a Constituent Assembly. We had a special congress to discuss workers rights in the future and where they go - in the law, to companies, or in a constitution. We decided that they go in *all three places*'.

But the situation regarding the Workers Charter Campaign is not so different from that of the Transvaal, where some unions have put a lot of work into the campaign and others have barely collected demands.

### Fighting factionalism

It seems that the labour movement in the Western Cape is not as weak as it was say three years ago, but it has a long way to go before all its problems are resolved. Although some unionists dispute that ideological conflicts are a major issue, it is evident that a lot of time and energy has gone into 'faction fighting'.

Debate is important and crucial - it is the suppression of it that seems to be the problem.

Veteran trade unionist, Lizzie Abrahams, who organised for the food and canning union for over 40 years, is perturbed:

'I am very sad when I see what has happened in Fawu, more time gets wasted trying to solve the problem than actually getting on with union work - but then even so, the problem does not get solved anyway. In fact things just get worse, and many factions do exist. The region has no reason to despair especially if it takes the issue of democracy seriously, and more acceptance and tolerance reigns. But because the region has had this horrible history of conflicts, tensions, and intolerance, changes will not happen overnight. Still it has to happen if the region wishes to build and recruit like it has never done before, and have a qualitatively better organising style'.

It is encouraging that in some quarters there is a commitment to changing styles of operating and deepening the levels of democracy (Nyembe admitting that these have to be reviewed). Old fashioned and intolerant, 'stalinist' ways of operating will have to be buried before any progress will be made. Further, the tendency to gloss over problems only exacerbates difficulties instead of resolving the problems.

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## NUM demands: Restructure the mining industry!

*MBULELO SOMPETHA reports on the crisis facing the mining industry, and its effects on mineworkers and their places of origin*

**T**he 7th congress of the National Union of Mineworkers (Num), held in Johannesburg during the last week of April, and attended by more than 800 delegates, was the most challenging in the union's 10-year history.

The most immediate issue was the crisis in the gold mining industry, and this was reflected in the theme of the congress: Restructuring the mining industry for a democratic South Africa. Num wants a restructuring of the mining industry as whole to address this crisis, which includes challenging old-style patriarchal forms of management. The congress also felt that the widespread wave of retrenchments brought on by the crisis had to be dealt with now, as it could not wait for a democratically-elected government to address the issue.

At its last congress in 1989, the union set a membership figure of 400 000 as its target. At the time of this year's congress it had 270 000 paid-up and 90 000 signed-members, a total of 360 000. The massive retrenchments hitting the industry will see a large chunk of its membership disappearing.

So far Num has succeeded in securing a provident fund as well as severance pay in some mining houses to help retrain retrenched members. But in general there has been a clear lack of co-operation from management on the issue. The union views it as a national crisis which it feels should be discussed with the Chamber of Mines, instead of individual mines.

**'They don't care a damn about us!'**  
The effects of the current retrenchments cannot be viewed in isolation from the



general problem of massive unemployment in South Africa. If increasing unemployment cannot be checked it will add to the already high levels of instability in the country - now and under a future government.

The number of workers employed by the mining industry at its peak in June in 1987 was 526 000. By the end of 1990 close to 100 000 workers had been retrenched, and according to Num's research 99% of those workers are still without jobs. Chamber of Mines (COM) Chairman Clive Knobbs announced recently that more than 190 000 miners are employed on mines which were unprofitable at the current gold price. If the situation does not improve thousands more workers will soon be retrenched.

The average black miner is among the lowest paid in South Africa. The current average minimum wage for black mine-workers is R500 a month, in contrast to the white average of R3 500. Since its inception the gold mines have been the backbone of the economy. Throughout all those years black workers' standard of living did not improve, and there has been no development in their mostly rural home towns. A Western Transvaal regional organiser of Num expresses his bitterness:

'Mines have been making profits since their establishment in 1886 and for only 2 years that they have been experiencing problems, they are retrenching us with nothing to live on. They do not care a damn about us. I feel that a new democratic government should take control of the mines from the present owners'.

### Regional effects

Most of the workers on the mines come from all over Southern Africa - from Lesotho, Botswana, Mozambique, Swaziland, as well as the bantustans. The mine-workers's home areas are very dependent on their wages. For example in both Mozambique and Lesotho mine-workers repatriate 60% of their wages in the form of deferred payment. Some R383 million was remitted to Lesotho by 1989, with Mozambique receiving some R110 million. The economies of these countries have been distorted by colonialism to be suppliers of cheap labour for the mines - with little economic development to sustain them otherwise.

Num estimates that more than 80 000 mine-workers nationally have been retrenched since 1989, 36 000 of which has been in the Free State region alone. Transkei and Lesotho, as the biggest suppliers

of migrant labour, have also been heavily affected by retrenchments, with up to 14 000 workers from Transkei already retrenched. According to the Chamber of Mines' 1990 figures, 100 376 workers were Transkeian migrants, 99 791 were from Lesotho and 48 875 Mozambique. With the threat of more closures thousands more will join others who are already out of work. Retrenchments and closures of mines are likely to turn many small towns into ghost towns if the situation in the mining industry does not improve. Of these, the Free State town of Virginia has taken the worst battering. Over the past 2 years, Rand Mines' Harmony mine, near Virginia, has retrenched 10 000 workers. This has had a devastating effect on the town.

In the nearby Phomolong village, which used to house mineworkers with their families, some houses stand empty. According to the town secretary Marius Davis, there are up to 400 empty houses in town and the council is feeling the pinch from the loss of income on service accounts.

### Workers demand retrenchment packages

To ensure that workers get a better deal when retrenched, the Num has proposed that among other things there should be 4 months notice given, 4 weeks pay for each year worked, and workers should receive training. Management's counter-offer has been 1 week's pay for each year worked. This caused Stilfontein workers to stay away from work on 20 March (the mine is due to close at the end of the year).

Despite the great amount of insecurity retrenchments have brought for Stilfontein workers, their resolve to fight for a better deal has not dampened. As one shaft-steward said: 'We want the mine bosses to pay us all so that we can survive while we are look for other work'.

At negotiations with Num recently, the Stilfontein mine-owners offered to set aside R3 million for both a severance package and a fund to retrain both black and white workers. Taking disparities between black and white workers into account, Num feels that this is too little and that some clarity is still needed on how the training is to be conducted.

### Workers wary

Stilfontein workers are wary about the reasons management have given for their retrenchment. While they accept that the gold price on the international market is low, they are sceptical about an announce-

ment by the Chamber of Mines that the union should not demand any increases this year. This is supposed to allow management to create 50 000 job opportunities and lessen retrenchments.

Workers are also suspicious about the mines' sub-contracting to companies which have very little or no union presence whatsoever. In this context workers see an attempt to destroy Num. They feel that while the economic reasons for retrenchments may be valid, there are also political reasons. As one Stilfontein worker said:

'As members of Num, we are affiliates of Cosatu which is aligned to the ANC - most likely our next government. They want to make sure that our future state inherits the social problems of the past government, which will be difficult to correct in a short space of time and ultimately cause instability. We hope our congress will try and work out policies which will guide us for the future'.

### Racism still the basis for exploitation

Historically, the Chamber of Mines has been responsible for migrant labour system. It has through all these years thrived on a cheap, reliable supply of labour. Various South African governments met its needs by passing tax laws, land laws and pass laws to force black men off the land and work for low wages.

While the apartheid state has finally admitted the failure of its policy of white supremacy, the situation has not improved on the mines. Mine-workers are still herded into overcrowded single sex hostels and compounds, with workers in many hostels still using cement bunkers as beds which are totally unfit for human habitation. Racial discrimination still forms the basis of exploitation of labour. It is against this background that Num calls on mine-workers to formulate an anti-racial discrimination charter, alongside its demand for the nationalisation of the mines.

This strategic industry is suffering from a hundred years of economic mismanagement and as such negotiations for retrenchment packages, though important, will remain palliatives as long as they are not linked to an overall national plan to create jobs in the place of origin of retrenchment victims. To this end Num is calling for an industry-level 'mining summit' between all mine unions and employers to look at the ills faced by the mining industry. In particular, Num wants a role in the restructuring of the industry in order to create jobs. •