



Teachers' unity rally, Durban, May 1990: five months later, South African teachers were to see the launch of the first united teachers' federation

The union has arrived...

... the education arena will never be the same again!

These are the words of one of the 1 500 delegates who converged in Johannesburg on 6 & 7 October to launch the South African Democratic Teachers' Union.

The optimistic and politically assertive mood which characterised the conference is reflected in the organisational structure, resolutions and strategies adopted at the launch of the new union.

Mandy Sanger reports

The structure adopted by the new teachers' union differs significantly from the usually bureaucratic and top-heavy structures of professional bodies. From the structure of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) it is clear that, in addition to a commitment to internal democracy, accountability, membership control and participation - principles absent from most professional bodies - the new teachers' union is gearing itself for a militant defence of its members' interests.

Like any other union SADTU has the sites in which union members gather - in this case the schools - as the basic units of the organisation.

Unlike professional organisations where there is an individual approach to problems, SADTU proposes a collective way of resolving issues which affect teachers. Instead of approaching the principal who then contacts the circuit office, a teacher who does not receive a cheque or who has any other grievance will have to lodge his/her complaint with the rep-

resentatives of the teachers, called the SADTU school committee - a structure that resembles a factory shop-steward committee. This style of organising teachers is new in this country. It shows that SADTU views itself as a trade union rather than a professional body.

This style of organising is not only reflected in the organisational strategies and structure of the new union, but also emerges in the resolutions adopted at the launch and in the campaigns SADTU proposes to take up. The conference proposed as part of SADTU's programme of action that the union immediately fights for 'recognition from the Minister of National Education as the only teachers' union representing teachers on a non-racial, national basis'. As a recognised union SADTU sees its role as formulating and negotiating a single and acceptable contract for all teachers.

The conference also decided to campaign for a 'living wage for all educators in South Africa'. This campaign is seen as being linked to the struggle against the temporary status of many teachers. The

• The author would like to thank the many people who generously contributed to this article

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As part of its programme of action, the union resolved 'to organise a campaign for a Teachers' Bill of Rights and Teachers' Charter'.

In addition to the call for one education department, SADTU committed itself to developing curricula that 'serve the needs of the people'. The conference noted that, as with the concept of people's education, the development of such a curriculum is not the prerogative of teachers, but must involve parents, students and community organisations. As its contribution to attempts to resolve the education crisis, SADTU decided to convene a conference to address the chaos in our schools and in the present education system.

From the mood at the conference and in terms of the organising approach adopted by SADTU, it is clear that there has been an intense radicalisation and politicisation of teachers in the last few months. Although not politically aligned, SADTU's preparedness to take political positions is attested by the resolutions adopted at the launch conference. The strata known for its political conservatism is beginning to assert itself. The confidence shown at the conference is a result of the unity that has been built over the past few months. It is the culmination of the bitter struggles fought by teachers.

But this path to unity within the teachers sector has not been an easy one. It has been long, thorny and acrimonious.

Given the context of organisation-building which we have witnessed in the last two decades, the coming together of 12 teacher organisations with a collective membership of 100 000 - 150 000 may be seen by those unfamiliar with the history of teacher organisations in this country as just another example of dif-

ferent organisations uniting to form a new body.

The history of teacher organisations - characterised by divisions, factionalism and provincialism - vividly illustrates the significance and special nature of the formation of SADTU.

No other sector has been as divided as the teaching sector. The divisions in South African society and the racially fragmented education system have led to the existence of various federal, provincial, ethnic and local teacher organisations. Before the launch of SADTU more than 30 teacher organisations existed in this country. Most of these were provincial or racially specific organisations linked up in a federalist manner with ethnic bodies such as the African Teachers' Association of South Africa (Atasa); the 'coloured' United Teachers' Association of South Africa (Utasa); the 'Indian' Teachers' Association of South Africa (TASA) and the 'whites only' Teachers Federal Council (TFC).

What is more striking however is the fact that since time immemorial there has been talk about the need for teacher unity. The more splits occurred, the more the talk of teacher unity intensified. Whenever this much-talked-about unity happened however, it never went beyond a paper agreement or a consultative relationship amongst the leaders of the different organisations. The 'deals' at the top fell far short of transcending the racial categorisation of teacher organisations in this country.

The establishment of SADTU is a culmination of a long process which has its origins in the April 1988 conference in Harare hosted by an international association of teacher organisations, the World Confederation of Organised Teaching Profession (WCOTP) and the teacher's wing of the African Continental Trade Union Centre (Oattu) - the All-African Teachers' Organisation (AATO). Also present at the meeting were South African organisations such as Cosatu, the ANC and Sactu. It has taken more than two years for these organisations to implement the conference recommendation of establishing a single, united teachers' union to which they had committed themselves.

This has not been an easy task. There have been times when the prospect of bringing the different teachers' organisations together have seemed very bleak. There have been many fights, stoppages and breakdowns along the way. As re-

campaign for permanent status and job security is part of a broader 'jobs for all' campaign. Consistent with the resolve to struggle for jobs for all teachers, the new National Executive Committee (NEC) was given a mandate to ensure 'that all newly qualified teachers be given posts in 1991'.

But more important in SADTU's attempts to take up the bread and butter issues which affect teachers is the resolution on women teachers. The launch conference demanded an end to discrimination of women teachers, demanding:

- immediate full parity in salaries between men and women;
- immediate full maternity benefits for all women teachers; and
- immediate fully paid accouchement leave for all women teachers.

The resolution did not only focus on the discrimination women are subjected to in the teaching profession, but also raised the need for an end to sexual harassment and victimisation within the organisation. The conference decided to encourage the full participation of women teachers in SADTU structures and to embark on an affirmative programme to ensure such participation. It was also decided to convene a conference that will focus on the plight of women teachers.

It would have been ironical had the conference been silent on political issues such as the need for one education department; the need for a free, equal, democratic and non-racial system, etc. Teachers, located in a politically charged arena, have two options: either they support the people or the ruling class. Clearly SADTU has chosen to be with the people.

The first myth that SADTU has attempted to expose is the demand by the authorities that teachers be politically inactive. In its conference the union has resolved that '...every teacher must have the right to be informed and politically active and to express his/her personal opinions in public without fear of victimisation'. This is a direct challenge to the 'code of conduct' which the education authorities demand teachers stick to. The teachers are not only adding their voice to the call for the right to be politically active without fear of victimisation, but are asserting that they must not be excluded from the political processes that will emerge from the present talks about talks between the ANC and the state.

cently as April this year one of the teachers organisations, the Western Cape Teachers' Union (Wectu) which has now gone into SADTU wrote in its newsletter: 'Sadly, the unity talks having been in process for more than two years, have not brought us closer to the formation of a single organisation. Some participants in the talks are determined not to be part of a single, non-racial organisation'.

In this newsletter Wectu went as far as attacking the two participants in the unity talks - Utasa and Atasa - and posed Wectu as the vehicle for teacher organisation in the Western Cape: 'The reluctance of Utasa and Atasa make it more imperative for progressive teachers to be organised into Wectu'.

Even on the eve of the launch sharp divisions emerged which meant that four of the organisations - the Transvaal United African Teachers' Association (Tuata); the 'whites only' Transvaal Teachers' Association (TTA); the Natal Teachers' Union (Natu) and the 'whites only' Natal Teachers' Society (NTS) - that had participated in the unity talks, are presently not part of the new teachers' union.

Tuata, which claims to represent about 35 000 teachers, had reservations about signing the unity agreement which stipulates that all the constituent organisations should be dissolved within a year after the launch, and that assets will then have to be transferred to the new union. Although Tuata has begun to raise the need to consult its constituency and 'the partiality of the new union to Cosatu' as the association's concerns, it is widely believed that the massive assets which the organisation has is the underlying source of contention. It has since become apparent that Natu is also mouthing the same charges as Tuata.

Both the TTA and NTS had problems with the unity agreement signed by the different teacher organisations on 30 September. According to the NTS the clause compelling constituent organisations to disband within a year and the demand that affiliates do nothing to contradict SADTU between the launch and the next conference, would infringe on the NTS's constitutional standing. Echoing the same sentiments the TTA said the clause stating that TTA members would have to work for SADTU is something that the organisation would not be able to justify in terms of the Industrial Relations Act. As far as the TTA is concerned the law has deter-

mined that its members cannot be compelled to do SADTU work.

But more disturbing was the announcement of the formation of a Nactu aligned teachers' union - the National Teachers' Union of South Africa (Natusa), just before the launch of SADTU.

The examples cited here have not been raised merely to illustrate the way in which even the launch of SADTU has been marred by differences and divisions. The point being made here is that the bringing together of 12 teachers' organisations with different traditions has been a great achievement, despite the difficulties.

The unity talks have gone through different phases and has had many ups and downs.

A few months after the Harare conference the first meeting was held to discuss the principles that were raised by the participants. All organisations reported that the 15 principles had been well-received by their members. This process of consultation took the rest of 1988. In 1989 the unity talks went into limbo. At the end of the 1989 NECC conference, the 'teacher unity' commission, although calling for the talks to continue, acknowledged that the establishment of a single teachers' organisation

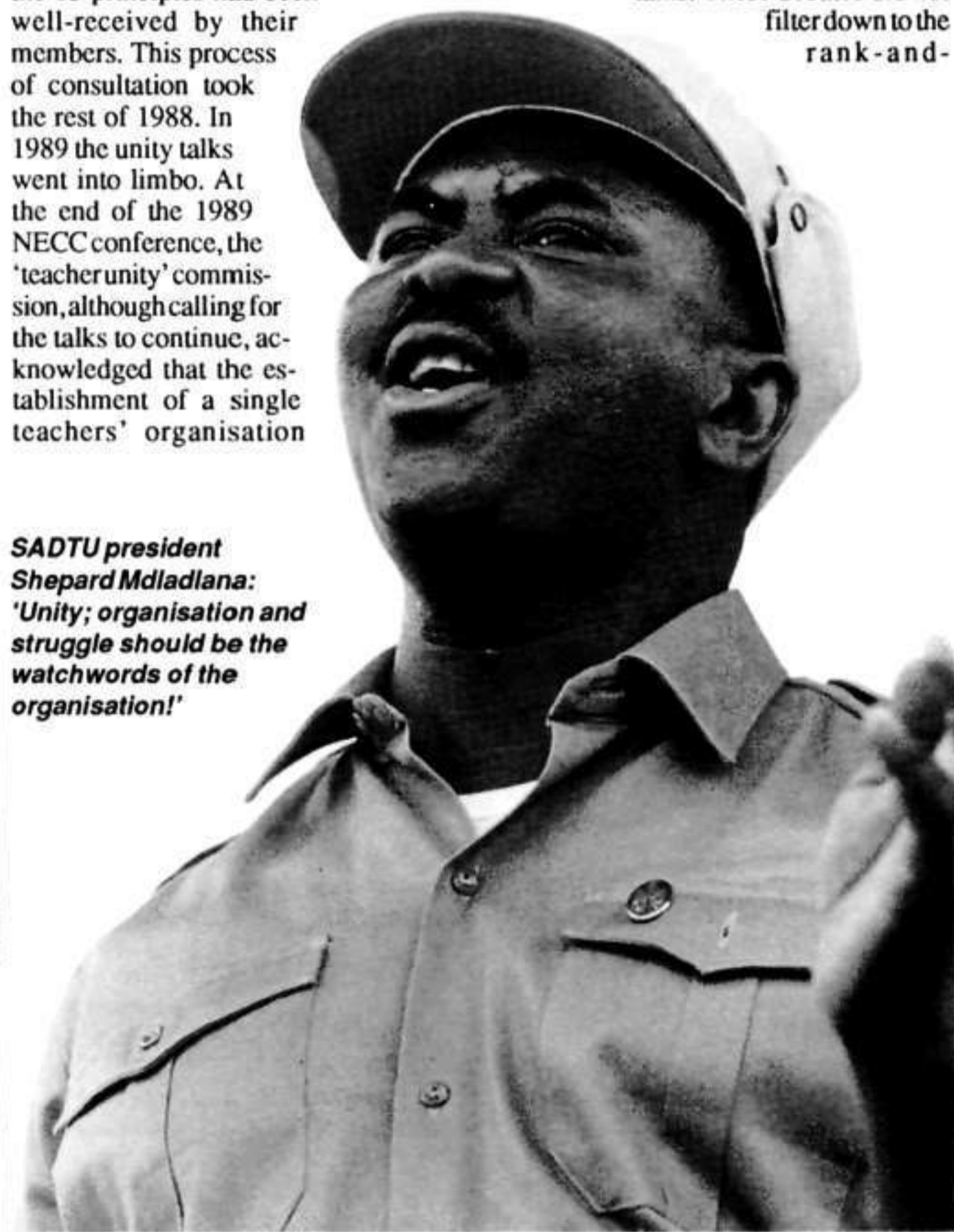
would take longer than initially expected.

The banning of Neusa in 1988 and Wectu and Detu in 1989, together with the repression meted out against the more militant teachers' unions and their members, meant the unions that had been spawned in the 1984/86 uprisings could not play their role in bringing together the different teacher organisations. This is an important factor if one considers that, despite their smallness in terms of membership if compared to the recognised organisations such as Atasa, Utasa and Tasa, the emergent unions had a more political approach to organising.

The other factor which affected the unity process was the divergent views on the new organisation. While all organisations agreed on the need for a single teachers' organisation, the form that this organisation should take raised many debates and much discussion, which more often than not led to paralysis in the unity talks. These debates did not

filter down to the rank-and-

SADTU president Shepard Mdladlana: 'Unity; organisation and struggle should be the watchwords of the organisation!'



file teachers and never really hastened the process of unity.

The two issues that were hotly debated were:

- whether the union would be a trade union or a professional body;
- whether the structure of the new organisation would be federal or unitary.

These two questions led to a crystallisation of two blocs within the teachers' unity forum. A bloc of the established and officially recognised organisations on the one hand and the bloc comprised of the new, small but politically assertive unions such as Wectu, Detu, Matu, Neusa and others. The latter grouped themselves as the 'progressive' bloc within the unity talks and has maintained, since its emergence, that it views and conceptualises the prospective national teacher organisation as a trade union that would affiliate to Cosatu

It was clear to this bloc that teachers, on their own, will be unable to sustain any form of radicalisation on a consistent basis. However in order to make a sig-

nificant contribution to the unfolding struggle, teachers have to maintain a relatively consistent level of radicalisation. The extent to which teachers participate alongside other sectors and strata of society will ensure and guarantee that the national teachers' organisation remains radical in outlook and practice.

But this belief is not as a result of hot-headedness on the part of the 'progressive' bloc. The emergent unions pointed to the conditions which affected teachers such as long hours of work; low wages; job insecurity and victimisation as necessitating a trade union organisation.

Only an organisation with a militant approach to these problems will be able to change the working conditions of teachers. The 'progressive' bloc felt that a teacher trade union will fulfill the task of taking up the bread and butter issues which affect teachers.

It was also important to this bloc that an organisation with a democratic character was built. For the 'progressive' bloc what the thousands of unorganised,

disorganised and loosely organised teachers throughout South Africa need, is leadership that is vigorously accountable, and that facilitates democracy at all levels.

A trade-union identity would incorporate local branches, democratically elected shop-stewards, regional and national executive elections which would perfectly suit the fulfilling of the democratic tasks that face teachers. In addition to this, regular branch, regional and national congresses would ensure the continued accessibility and, therefore, accountability of structures, to the rank-and-file teachers.

Although not opposed to the idea of teachers being organised under a union, the established and officially recognised teacher organisations wavered on this question. They felt the union approach adopted by the emergent unions was not catering for the 'professional interests' of teachers. No strong political counter was forwarded by the established or-

Some of the challenges

The launch of SADTU represents for the first time in the history of South Africa, the birth of a national, unitary, non-racial, non-sexist teacher union. This is a serious challenge by teachers to apartheid education which, over the years, has divided teachers into different racial categories and departments of education.

The National Teacher Unity Forum (NTUF), the precursor to SADTU, already reflected the potential of a single national teachers' union to confront the divide and rule policy of the state. Teachers from all departments and from all corners of South Africa now have the opportunity to channel their common demands through a single union and to direct these at a common enemy - the apartheid state. In refusing to continue to organise in a manner that entrenches the racist ideology of the state, SADTU is clearly striking a blow against the apartheid education system and adding weight to the demand for a single education department.

The state has always relied on the support of teachers to disseminate its ideology and in the main teachers (except at crisis points like the 1940s, 1950s, 1976 and 1984/86) have been obedient

carriers of state ideology into the classroom. In this respect, teachers have represented, on the whole, a conservative force in the unfolding struggle for democratic control of schools.

South African education has been in a crisis for a long time and students, not teachers, have historically been in the forefront of confronting this struggle head-on. More often than not teachers have been the ones to stifle legitimate student militancy brought on by gross inequalities in the system. While students were turning schools into a terrain of struggle, teachers took a neutral stand or stood side by side with the authorities in trying to force the students back into the classroom.

It is clear from recent events, however, that the state has lost the support of a significant section of teachers to the liberation struggle. While previously it was relatively easy for the state to act against individual teachers who refused to march to their tune, today the state would have to act against thousands of such teachers.

After many decades in which the teaching sector has been dominated by politically cautious teacher organisations, we are witnessing the revival of

traditions last seen in the 1940s and 1950s. Teachers are taking their rightful place within the mass movement. The struggle for a people's education is being advanced by the establishment of SADTU. The birth of the union facilitates the building of unity between parents, teachers and students - a prerequisite for seizing control over education.

But more pertinently, what the formation of SADTU raises is a question which has been the subject of intense debate within the mass movement: the question of alliances. Over the years two dominant positions have emerged:

- The position which has been labelled 'workerist' but which more accurately represents syndicalist and ultra-left views on alliances. According to this view non-working-class strata can never adopt radical positions.
- The second view which has become known as the 'populist' position ditches radical programmes out of a fear of antagonising desperately sought-after non-working-class allies. According to this view teachers can be won into the mass movement only if we adopt the lowest common demands.

What is common to both these positions is a belief that the middle class

organisations to the idea of a teachers' union. The concern became the need to find a balance between the 'professional' and 'union' responsibilities of the new organisation.

The fact that teachers had been excluded from the 1956 Labour Relations Act was also raised by the officially recognised organisations. Thus the Utasa booklet used the following extract from the Labour Relations Act in support of its argument against a trade union: 'This act shall not apply to persons ... employed by the state in respect of their employment such as ... nor to persons who teach, educate or train other persons at any university, technikon, college, school or any other educational institution maintained wholly or partly from public funds'.

But this was not a strong argument, particularly in the context of the struggle to have the LRA changed, so that all workers are included under one labour legislation.

The 'progressive' bloc vigorously

opposed all notions of federalism as it merely entrenched the apartheid structures of education. As far as the 'progressive' bloc was concerned a federal structure would mean that the union would remain loosely co-ordinated and that by and large teachers would remain affiliated to essentially racially-defined organisations.

As it was important, politically, for unity to be forged from the bottom and not from the top, the 'progressive' bloc argued that an important component of the bottom-up process was non-racialism.

At a workshop on teachers' unity held in Cape Town under the auspices of Cosatu and involving the CPTA, Detu, Tasa, Wectu and the Peninsula African Teachers Association (Penata) - an affiliate of Atasa, one of the members of the 'progressive' bloc had this to say: 'If we are serious about contributing to the formation and construction of a new South Africa that is non-racial, democratic and

distinctly non-exploitative, then our structures and operations must reflect this. We cannot continue to exist in our separate and racially defined teacher structures on the one hand, and on the other, expect to undermine the state's racist and exploitative education system - let alone contribute to the broader liberation movement for fundamental change in South Africa.

So, for political reasons we need to form a unitary teachers' structure that can fight in a focussed way against the single but federal South African education system. We must begin to undermine the structures that they have imposed on us and the whole of South Africa'.

But it is not only for political reasons that the 'progressive' bloc called for a unitary structure. The proposal for a unitary structure went hand-in-hand with the conception that the new organisation should be a trade union. The emergent unions strongly argued that only a unitary structure can take up the day-to-day problems of teachers.

Although they agreed with the need for a unitary teachers' organisation, the established associations felt a federal structure must be used as a stepping stone to what is an ultimate goal - a new teachers' union with a unitary structure.

The established unions felt it would be premature to disband the existing organisations, as this could lead to dislocation and effective renegeing on the important task of looking after the interests of the teacher members.

What the established organisations feared most was the possibility of losing official recognition. This, they felt, would be a disservice to their members.

It was the teachers' struggles that erupted after 2 February which gave the unity process a jolt. In the aftermath of the unbanning of organisations and the subsequent release of Nelson Mandela we witnessed teachers taking to the streets in their thousands throughout South Africa. Teachers from the ranks of established teacher organisations like Atasa, Tasa and Utasa - many of whom had previously worked hand-in-glove with the government - joined teachers from the ranks of the emergent and more radical teacher unions in marches, mass rallies, chalk-downs and awareness programmes.

We have also seen a joint delegation taking the demands of teachers throughout South Africa to National Education

facing SADTU

cannot be significantly radicalised.

What the formation of SADTU and the recent struggles of teachers reveal is that under particular circumstances, and more importantly under the leadership of the working class, sections of the middle class can be won over to revolutionary positions.

It is important to understand where teachers fit into the unfolding struggle. On the whole, teachers are petit bourgeois. Black teachers, unlike the white middle class, are oppressed and lack fundamental political rights in common with the great majority of the oppressed. For this reason black teachers cannot vote for a single government, live in areas of their own choice, teach in schools of their choice, etc.

With the De Klerk reforms, teachers have become enthused by what appears to be an imminent post-apartheid South Africa. This, coupled with the increasing deteriorating material conditions of teachers, has driven teachers to radical action. On the one hand De Klerk's reforms have raised teachers' hopes, while on the other this has come into direct contradiction with the fact that teachers increasingly have to tolerate appalling conditions: overcrowded class-

rooms, longer hours of teaching, being underpaid, job insecurity, maladministration/corruption in the racially segregated education departments, lack of rights in schools, increasing threats of unemployment and other more overt forms of victimisation.

This contradiction has played itself out in the resultant teacher anger and frustration witnessed in the first half of this year. Inspired by the struggles of youth and workers which led to a minipolitical upsurge in the period immediately after the 2 February announcements, teachers began to use methods of struggle which were previously the domain of the most exploited and militant workers in society - the strike or 'chalks-down'; go-slows; marches; the handing in of record books; burning of letters of misconduct; mass rallies; defiant refusal to complete leave forms for stay-away action, etc.

What this demonstrates is that a large section of the black middle class has nothing to fear in a radical transformation of South African society. It is the task of the mass movement to advance this radical programme and not to tone it down, if it wants to win significant sections of the black middle class.

Minister Gene Louw, with the support of thousands of primary and secondary teachers as well as trainee teachers from the colleges.

The teachers' strikes in the first half of this year gave life to the National Teacher Unity Forum (NTUF) and the unity process. It was in a meeting called in April, in response to the strikes and the education crisis, that a timetable towards the establishment of SADTU was adopted.

Thus, thousands of teachers throughout South Africa were drawn to the idea of a single teachers' union through their own spontaneous strikes and marches. This groundswell of activity which sometimes occurred outside of the ranks of NTUF 'structures' very often happened despite NTUF rather than because of its influence.

The drafting of a memorandum of demands and the delegation to the minister, as well as the propagandistic effect of the march, served to centralise the focus of teacher frustration nationally and placed NTUF at the head of all teacher struggles. For the first time the process of teacher unity took on a national and grassroots character.

After the April 'emergency' meeting things moved swiftly and the new union was launched in October 1990. What sceptics called a dream was attained.

But this was not an easy task. Many compromises were made along the way. Until next year SADTU will remain an organisation with affiliates - something which contradicts the desired unitary structure. The question of affiliation to a trade union federation has also been postponed until next year.

As a result of the compromises and the attempts to accommodate everyone, the launch conference took the form of a consensus conference where the adoption of the unity agreement and the constitution and the election of officials were unanimously agreed upon.

The national executive committee consists of representatives of all the teacher organisations that signed the unity agreement. It was agreed that this will be a transitional executive which will see SADTU through the first year during which branches and regional structures throughout the country will be set up.

Just how justifiable these compromises are is to be determined by what happens in the future. What cannot be denied however is that concessions have been made by the parties involved. Another critical problem is the fact that the unity which has been agreed upon

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still remains a paper agreement which has been entered into at the top.

1991 is going to be crucial in determining the character of SADTU. It can either develop into a top-heavy and bureaucratic structure or a democratic and mass teachers' union with an accountable leadership.

The way SADTU goes about building democratic, non-racial, politically vibrant mass branches is vital for the organisation. The danger exists that the unity which has been cemented at the top can disintegrate and that SADTU will become nothing else but a consultative body for racially specific organisations and localised structures.

If SADTU is to develop into a union that can begin to address the dynamic economic, educational and political needs of teachers and society at large, then the gains of the launch need to be built on and developed. The major tasks in this coming year are covered by the resolutions thrashed out and adopted at the conference. SADTU must make sure these resolutions don't just become mere rhetoric, but are used as a guide to a programme of action.

If SADTU accepts that women make up more than 60% of the teaching corps in this country then its only hope of being mass-based lies in its ability to organise women teachers.

The fact that the Transitional National Executive Committee only contains one woman is a reflection of the lack of active involvement of women on the ground.

The regional programmes of action must make women's issues such as maternity leave with full pay, equal pay for equal work at a living wage, sexual harassment, etc, the main issues around which teachers are mobilised. In order

for this to become a reality, regional women's groups/committees have to be set up which are open to all members and which must ensure that women's issues are taken up in a programmatic way and that women become a dynamic part of SADTU.

The programme of action will have to take into account the very real differences that exist among teachers. Even though we have achieved the formation of a national, unitary structure the teachers who are part of this come from very different backgrounds and traditions.

What is needed is a style of organisation that will begin to weld activism and grassroots participation with the ability to maintain and represent a sizeable membership.

We cannot just continue to organise teachers on an overtly political basis. In a period of intense crisis this is possible and necessary - but when the toyi-toying dies down we need to be in a position to hold onto the thousands by involving them structurally in the day-to-day running of the branches.

A union approach has to incorporate organising teachers around the issues that affect them directly, as well as maintain a strong sense of accountability and democracy throughout the ranks.

The only guarantee for a democratic teachers' union lies in the ability of that union to become mass-based and not top-heavy with the leadership in a position to take arbitrary decisions. The lifeblood of SADTU must be the most oppressed and exploited teachers and not those who hold powerful positions in the school.

It is also important that the new union clearly defines its trade union role. The situation that prevailed with those organisations in the 'progressive' bloc where claims of membership were made without being able to verify this in terms of paid-up membership, must be curtailed.

The struggle for recognition will go a long way in solving this. The new union must fight for stop-order facilities with the education authorities.

It will be even more crucial for the union to take up the debate on affiliation to a trade union federation. In order to improve their conditions teachers need the power of the whole working class.

As the president of the new union, Shepard Mdladlana, said in his address at the launch rally: 'Unity; organisation and struggle should be the watchwords of the organisation!'