

Organising local authority workers

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Local administration has grown along with other state departments into an immense organisation, consuming a large proportion of the national budget and employing literally thousands of people. Central Statistical Services figures for 1986, for example, indicate that the total number of people presently employed within the local authorities sector presently stands at 263,000 of whom more than 138,000 are blacks. The public sector also presently stands as the largest employer as a whole outside of domestic, agricultural and farm labour. The Institute of Race Relations figures for June 1985 put the numbers of people employed throughout this sector at 1,413,892 as opposed to 1,346,300 in manufacturing and 755,712 in trade and catering. COSATU's decision to organise the public sector therefore potentially opens the space for tremendous growth in the number of organised workers.

The potential role of the public sector unions also begins to focus attention on the nature of the state, or state-linked corporations as an employer. Yet surprisingly little is known about this. In the following article the problems involved in organising local authority workers will be studied. The article focusses on the area around Johannesburg in the period 1980 to 1986 with the hope that some of the processes which begin to be uncovered will aid our understanding of the mechanisms by which employers neutralise and disrupt the workforce, in an attempt to stem militancy from within this strategic sector. The question of what power local authority workers potentially hold also begins to be addressed.

Of the three tiers of government (national, regional and local) the area of greatest autonomy with regard to labour relations exists at the local level, although there is definite consistency with regard to central policy decisions. The definition of "local authority" may sometimes be confusing. There are basically three types of local authorities which provide various services including:

- Health, refuse removal, sewerage, etc.

- Parks and recreational facilities

- Security

- Water supply

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Electricity

Protection services, such as fire-fighting, ambulance services,
Traffic control

Passenger transport

The various local authorities which have provided these services (not always all) include municipalities or city councils, the previous administration boards - now undertaken by town or community councils, and in some cases regional water boards. Provision of local services are now also undertaken by various "homelands".

Local authority workers, unlike central state employees, are included in the provisions of the Labour Relations Act, meaning that they have access to conciliation board machinery. However because the work which they carry out is defined as part of the "essential services" they are denied the right to strike. Section 46 of the Act tries to redress this situation somewhat by providing for compulsory arbitration in the event of any dispute. Nevertheless this provision can still be easily exploited by employers in the sense that the whole process of attending to immediate worker grievances may be delayed. In addition because the large majority of local authority workers are migrants, employers have often resorted to immediate mass dismissal in the event of a work stoppage. This has happened in many recent cases: the stoppage at Potchestroom municipality in 1985, and in a number of stoppages in 1986 notably Empangeni, Richards Bay, Tembisa, Kagiso, Thokoza, and so on. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this kind of response occurred in the 1980 Johannesburg Municipal workers strike where more than 1,000 workers were forcibly deported back to their various "homelands". Employers have also been able to exploit the massive unemployment problem in these areas to find easy replacements for dismissed workers.

Unionists trying to organise local authority workers find not only the legal prohibition on the right to strike a major problem, but also the dispersed nature of work sites, the small gangs of workers at such site, close supervision, and conservative employers some of their most difficult obstacles. The fact that many workers are housed in local authority owned hostels, under armed guard, is a further obstacle as unauthorised access is denied. This means that unless the union is officially granted recognition rights, or limited access rights, access to the workforce can become particularly difficult. Up until now most of the unions organising local authority workers in the Johannesburg area have

not obtained registration and have on this basis been denied such rights. Municipal and General Workers Union (MGWUSA) officials interviewed expressed their problems as follows:

We can't go in and see workers, our members, where they stay and we can't go and visit them, unless they come to our offices. If we are caught talking to workers during lunch-times we may be arrested". (1)

Employers have complicated the problem of access by creating various in-house (or "sweetheart") unions and concluding closed-shop agreements with these unions at Industrial Council level.

The state realises the strategic significance, politically and otherwise, of workers within this sector, thus an elaborate and complex system of dividing the workforce has been developed. Bargaining machinery is highly fragmented, meaning that union gains in any one area or region cannot easily be extended to other regions. Wage determinations for unskilled workers, for example, exclude a number of crucial towns and cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria. Industrial councils where bargaining around wages and working conditions takes place are also fragmented. This makes negotiation on a sector basis impossible. Cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town have their own industrial councils. On the other hand the industrial council for the Transvaal Municipal Undertaking excludes certain towns like Secunda and Pretoria as well as all black local authorities.

Where industrial councils do exist these bodies exhibit various degrees of flexibility as far as bargaining with "outside" (ie: not the employer created in-house) unions is concerned. MGWUSA, Transport and General Workers Union, and South African Black Municipal and Allied Workers Union, all indicate that greater flexibility exists in the Transvaal towns which form part of the Transvaal Municipal Undertaking. The unions report that some form of bargaining has already occurred at a number of Transvaal towns. TGWU has concluded a recognition agreement at Secunda and at a number of Natal towns. The union also reports that it has majority representation at Springs, Brits and Diepmeadow and will be seeking recognition at these places. Recently TGWU also went into the industrial council for the Johannesburg Municipal Undertaking and has gained a limited access agreement there. MGWUSA claims that negotiations with the Krugersdorp municipality occurred during 1985. Talks deadlocked however after the municipality refused to sign a declaration undertaking not to victimise union members. At

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present recognition rights at Krugersdorp are still being sought. SABMAWU claims that recognition rights have been sought at Randfontein, Kempton Park and Vanderbijlpark and that some form of bargaining has already occurred at these places.

An employer like the Johannesburg City Council (JCC) however exhibits outright hostility towards any outside unions. The closed shop agreement with a number of in-house unions has historically prevented unions from making much in-road here. In addition the JCC insists that unions be part of the Industrial Council first before any negotiations take place. In order to do this unions firstly had to show representation and be registered. Representation on the other hand was particularly difficult to show. The "conditions of service" concluded at industrial council level automatically forces all JCC employees to belong to one or more of the unions represented on that body. By virtue of this all the JCC employees automatically belong to the various in-house unions without these unions having to recruit at all. In order to understand how this situation came to develop, the suppression of the 1980 Johannesburg Municipal workers strike and employer strategy pursued since then must be studied. What emerges clearly is that employers' ability to prevent the spread of progressive unionisation amongst the workforce during that time contributed to the years of difficulty experienced thereafter.

The 1980 municipal workers strike

The 1980 strike in many ways posed some of the essential problems faced by unions trying to organise local authority workers. These have already been dealt with elsewhere. (see articles in SALB 6.7, 1981) This section will merely recap some of the most significant factors which emerged then. The pre-history to the strike is also important as black workers up until 1979 had only employer created liaison committees to represent them. This liaison committee was for the "graded staff" only, thereby excluding the majority of unskilled black workers from any form of representation. For so-called Coloured workers a separate workers union dating back to 1961 existed. As a direct result of the 1979 Wiehahn proposals employers at the JCC openly went about the process of trying to turn the existant liaison committee into a union for black workers. The JCC's willingness to create such a union must be seen in the context of the period, the growth of independent progressive unions since 1973 and general unrest in the country during that time. The black in-house union was therefore a clear attempt to

keep the more militant independent unions away. This union, to be called the Union of Johannesburg Municipal Workers (UJMW), was formed with the help of existing liaison committee members. According to Jeremy Keenan, at the time of its formation the liaison committee members, 50% of whom were council nominated, were given paid leave to organise the new union. They were given free access to all the compounds and workplaces, and even made use of council stationery. At the same time workers in the transport department were going about forming a representative union of their own. This union was to become the Black Municipal Workers Union (BMWU). These workers had formed independent "works committees" which represented a direct threat to the UJMW.

At the inaugural launch of the UJMW on January 23 1980 almost all 3,000 workers present walked out in protest. It was estimated at the time that only 113 workers remained behind to adopt the constitution and elect the executive committee. Of these only 59 actually voted, the other 54 abstained. Keenan reports that when the UJMW was granted provisional registration six months later there were only 40 paid up members. The works committees on the other hand formed the backbone of the BMWU, which was to become the leading force during the strike.

The strike

On July 24 1980, 600 workers at the Orlando Power Station stopped work demanding wage increases. Management's response on the day of the stoppage was to demand that workers send forward their representatives. Apparently a 22-man "workers action committee" was immediately elected to negotiate around their demands. Negotiations deadlocked after an hour during which time all demands put forward by the workers were refused. Thereafter workers were told to go back to work or face dismissal. It appears that these workers were subsequently fired/locked out of the compound. By the 29th more than 10,000 workers from all departments had joined the strike. The wage increase and recognition of the BMWU emerged as two central demands. Management responded by bringing in scabs (white schoolchildren) and calling the police. Many workers were locked in to the compounds thereby preventing them from gathering together and isolating the leadership from the members. By July 31 more than 1,000 workers were forcibly deported, 280 Venda recruits were on their way to replace some of these workers, and the strike "leaders" had been charged under the Sabotage Act. The remaining workers were forced to find their own way home, many hung around

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Johannesburg seeking other employment. Conditions in the "homelands" forced many back to work for the JCC again. The union on the other hand found itself unable to help workers as the period after the strike was taken up with trying to secure the release of the leaders. At the time the BMWU was clearly unprepared organisationally and in terms of resources for a strike within the sector. The union was only one month old and although it claimed representation amongst the majority of the workforce only 900 members had formally signed up.

Employer response

Throughout the strike the JCC consistently refused to negotiate with the BMWU on the basis that it was an unregistered union. The UJMW, which was also not registered at the time however received a more favourable response. Management's attempts to undermine the union by requesting separate negotiation with workers in each department was met with general derision. The workers generally refused to elect any representatives, insisting that the union was their representative. Management also tried to undermine the strike through spreading contradictory stories to the press, and deliberately underplaying the numbers of workers actually out on strike. Today this kind of response can still clearly be seen, the SATS strike once again reflects a similar pattern.

The employers' ability to smash the strike by simply deporting, or alternatively mass dismissal of migrants remains one of the key problems faced by local authority (and other) workers to this day. Whereas union organisers had managed to overcome rural-urban divides at the workplace the problem of formulating an adequate response to mass dismissal nevertheless remains. The other major problem was employers' ability to exploit the large reserve army of labour and find easy replacements, particularly in the homelands, for the fired workers. The municipality's close links with other state departments, their ability to mobilise civilians (white) and the Police and Defence force to help break the strike remained another problem. Other government departments played a major role in sending in replacements, which raises the question of appropriate solidarity action amongst all "public sector" workers.

Perhaps the most important lesson learnt during the strike however was the need for unions to extend strike action within this sector beyond localised areas in order to put sufficient pressure on their employers. It became particularly clear that far greater

power was needed if employers and the state were to be challenged effectively. In order to command this kind of power the Johannesburg workers needed to (i) extend organisational links beyond Johannesburg, (ii) develop strong solidarity links with community groups and other unions, (iii) deal with the problem of in-house unions in a consistent and organised manner. The in-house unions played no small role in undermining the strike, and the employers response at the time clearly indicates that the motivation was mainly to buy time for the UJMW to consolidate itself.

The in-house unions

The in-house unions, the UJMW for "black" workers and the Johannesburg Municipal Combined (formerly Coloured) Employees Union (JMCEU), play a major role in the Municipality's overall system of control. This it is argued stems partly from the specific nature of the "production process" within the local authorities sector. There are no major technological advances, not on the same scale at any rate, which might facilitate employer control at the workplace. The "unskilled" nature of much of the work done provides for a dangerously high level of homogeneity within the workforce. This is exacerbated by worker concentration at the compounds, where a shared experience of exploitation easily takes root. Due to these factors a more overt system of control is needed. The notable presence of supervisors, the need for tame unions, a high level of repression at the compounds, etc, all form part of this system of control.

There are also "political" forms of control and once again the role of the in-house unions in this process is clearly important. The reproduction of capitalist enterprise, which is the major reason for the existence of the state sector, requires not only the reproduction of services needed to maintain capital and wage labour (economically, politically, and ideologically) but also the reproduction of a compatible racial-capitalist state apparatus. The people who actually staff the state apparatus are of vital importance. It is in this sense that a strike within this sector is most threatening; administrative structures must include a mechanism whereby the staffing of the state apparatus ensures a compliant and loyal workforce. When this begins to be challenged, when there is a breakdown in the state administration itself the political consequences are tremendous. For this reason the upper echelons of the civil and local state apparatus have historically been strictly preserved for "whites". Recent reforms however have

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seen changes particularly at local state level, the twin rationalisation-job differentiation package introduced in 1984 for example is designed to increase the numbers of blacks who are willing to play a role in local and civil state administration. (2) The proposed Regional Services Councils (RSCs) tries to take these reforms, deracialisation of administrative tasks insofar as bulk service provision is concerned, at local level, even further. In this sense any expansion of the state administration, particularly when increasing numbers from the oppressed classes themselves are drawn in, heightens the potential political significance of state sector workers.

The question of how compliance is maintained must therefore be addressed. In the case of the JMCEU at least, one writer has noted that (i) the majority of the union's leadership occupy managerial positions at the JCC, (ii) there is almost no organic link between the union executive and the broader membership. These unions have no shop floor structures, in fact they don't even need to recruit members. The writer noted that leadership are lured away from the membership through benefits, job mobility, and their close association with employers. Support for this leadership comes from the "white-collar" clerical and administrative staff who are reasonably secure in their jobs, are satisfied with salaries, and are more interested in the various benefits (insurance schemes, house improvement loans, etc) which the union can offer. (3) Marcel Golding, writing on the civil service noted similar strategies:

Co-option strategies [are] directed at the permanent officials who are vital to the state and play an important function in the implementation of the New Deal. The material incentives that are offered, ensured functional civil apparatus in the face of enormous opposition by the oppressed classes. On the other hand a divisive, disorganising and discriminatory employment strategy is pursued with regard to the temporary workers in order to stifle united action. (4)

These processes are perhaps more visible in the newly created black local authority structures. At the JMCEU 1985 AGM the General-Secretary noting the creation of separate local authorities for each racial group as part of the "new" dispensation noted:

The main aim of this dispensation is to grant the various race groups a greater say and power over decision making in their local affairs. We shall therefore examine how

this measure will affect us as employees of local government in employment and promotion... We can now demand that preference of employment be given to our members to serve their own communities". (5)

Nevertheless it is clear that as a direct result of the 1980 strike many members in these unions began a process of questioning of their own leadership. These workers were objectively able to identify with the BMWU. In the case of the JMCEU the role played by leadership, the fact that members in the housing department actually scabbed, began a four year struggle by a number of mainly "blue-collar" workers for democratic control of the union. The reform group, as they called themselves, however failed due to lack of experience, insufficient mobilisation, and the very structure of annual AGM meetings, which is the only time membership actually come together en masse. (6) Formalistic procedures and despotic control by the chairperson, according to this group, prevented them from successfully ousting the leadership. These events highlight the very fragile base of these in-house unions. A consistent and organised strategy directed at the membership may quickly lead to their downfall.

The period after 1980

One of the unfortunate effects of the strike was that it allowed employers and the various in-house unions time to strengthen their position in relation to any "outside" unions. The UJMW and the JMCEU together with ten other unions of which four are in-house unions for "white" municipal workers, were incorporated into the industrial council for the Johannesburg Municipal Undertaking on a closed-shop basis. This effectively meant that these two unions would be the only officially recognised representatives for all the JCC's black employees. The workforce was further divided on a racial basis, all "Coloured" workers automatically belonging to the JMCEU, all "black" workers automatically part of the UJMW. This made access to the workers for unions standing outside of this forum very difficult. In order to prove representivity, which was necessary in order to challenge the system, independent unions would have to require members to formally resign from these unions as soon as they signed up. This was difficult to do in view of workers fear of victimisation.

Even were a union was able to gain members the union could never represent such workers at departmental disciplinary enquiries, the

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usual forum where individual grievances are handled. At best the union could write a letter to the Staff Board on a members behalf, requesting that an enquiry be held and then assisting the worker in terms of formulating his/her grievance. Given this situation many workers, whilst actually belonging to unions TGWU or MGWUSA, actually continued to use in-house unions at such proceedings.

Nevertheless the period since 1980 has seen the growing consolidation of independent progressive unions organising local authority workers. Up until now this has taken the form of a slow process of recruiting and training membership. In this sense the unions organising in this sector are still lagging way behind the private sector unions, such as metal, textiles, chemicals, mining, and so forth in terms of gaining recognition rights or any negotiation around substantive issues. This situation was only beginning to change, particularly with regard to the JCC, in 1986/7.

As a result of the difficulties experienced unions organising independently of the JCC resorted to establishing "departmental works committees" along the same lines as those which existed prior to the strike. The works committee would be part of the union, and would recruit members on the union's behalf. These works committees would represent general grievances at the level of each department. The union which made most use of this tactic was the TGWU. Subjects listed for committee discussion in terms of the constitution include hygiene and working conditions, output and productivity, conditions of employment and benefits, safety, employee services (health schemes and transport) and disciplinary procedures. The benefits of organising along the committee system according to TGWU is that it created a space for the union to penetrate the system at precisely the point where the in-house unions were weakest (the shop floor) and also trained committee members in democratic worker representation. A union like MGWUSA did not use this system but formed committees at the compounds where possible. These compound committees recruited members and popularised the union. MGWUSA had no way of representing members other than those mentioned earlier.

A further union, SABMAWU, has tended to stay out of the JCC area altogether. This union's strategy has been to organise all the surrounding municipalities and black local authorities with the view to consolidating a power base there first, before the tough JCC employers could be taken on. In general SABMAWU's stance has been a lot more militant. The union is almost solely responsible for a rash of strikes amongst local authority workers on the Rand

since 1985. All of these strikes have been "illegal". The union now claims that they have begun to organise JCC workers and that they are seriously considering applying for recognition and also registration. Like MGWUSA, SABMAWU has remained unregistered. The following section will evaluate each of these unions in greater detail. What becomes clear in the separate paths pursued by each since 1980 is that a whole record of struggle relating to the problem of organising local authority workers has built up. Union weaknesses up until now have naturally also become clearer.

MGWUSA

In 1981 the BMWU split into two factions, the breakaway group went on to form SABMAWU, whilst those remaining with Joe Mavi and Gatsby Mazwi (two of the leaders in the 1980 strike) eventually formed the Municipal and General Workers union of South Africa. It appears that the reason for the split related to union finances. There were also ideological tensions between the two factions; by 1983 these positions had become solidified. MGWUSA closely identified with a non-racial position and was one of the first unions to join the UDF. SABMAWU however retained the black consciousness tradition which had been present since the beginning of BMWU, and eventually went into the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA). MGWUSA has recently merged with Municipal Workers Union, largely Natal-based, in preparation for the move towards one national local authorities union within COSATU. The new union - Municipal Workers Union of South Africa - claims to have a membership of more than 10,000 nationally and to have set up branches in various parts of the country. Exact membership figures are difficult to ascertain however because of the recent merger and because there have never been stop-order facilities. In the Johannesburg area MGWUSA claims to have members at Soweto Dobsonville, Krugersdorp, and the JCC.

Thus far MGWUSA has not been able to effectively represent members at any local authority. The union organiser says that besides committees set up at compounds insofar as the JCC is concerned there is no further contact with members. Members are forced to visit head-office or alternatively they may attend seminars organised by the union at various venues. Progress went further at the Krugersdorp municipality; but no recognition rights exist yet.

TGWU

The Transport and General Workers Union has possibly made the

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furthest in-roads into organising and gaining access to the JCC workforce. Historically the core members of this union were part of a group of workers from the JCC who approached the Industrial Aid Society in 1978 over retrenchments. These workers were later incorporated into the FOSATU Workers Project and thereafter became TGWU members. In the period 1978 to 1986 the union has managed to train workers in democratic worker representation, it has set up a core following and presence on the shop floor through the departmental works committees. The union has also gone furthest in terms of gaining recognition rights, particularly in the Natal region. They claim that besides the JCC there are also members at Brits, Secunda, Springs and Diepmeadow. Thus far the union has concentrated on organising the JCC workers.

TGWU has up until now been a general union, defining itself initially as a "service sector" union. The result is that TGWU has members in the Transport, Construction, Local Authority, and Security sectors. Of these the total number of local authority workers, according to the union number about 9,000 nationally. At the JCC the union now has membership of roughly 1,800 of the total black workforce of roughly 14,000. The union is strongest in Natal where the local authority component numbers about 5,000 of the 9,000 workers organised.

The union has a clear policy towards recognition agreements, believing that these should be sought as far as possible, after a particular local authority has been well organised. There is also a strong tradition of building up shop floor structures and developing a well trained worker leadership. The union shop steward structures operate on a departmental basis, organisers try to ensure a departmental spread. These shop stewards then form a negotiating committee to negotiate with management before and after recognition is achieved. Because of the diverse conditions surrounding negotiation at each local authority the union follows a policy of selecting and organising per local authority. "It is important that members win demands on a local basis first, because this is a way of mobilising and drawing in membership", says the union General Secretary. Ultimately the union would like to negotiate on a sector or regional basis, whilst ensuring that power at the local level is not compromised. The unions are a long way away from this however, first they must consolidate into one strong national union.

TGWU believes that a strike should be the last resort, that a

union should try to strengthen its status with a particular local authority first. This is because of the vulnerability of the workforce in this sector. Localised action is likely to lead to mass dismissal or deportation. Mass dismissals, according to the General Secretary, "greatly weaken the union, even if one does win reinstatement thereafter, which is highly unlikely. The union's capacity to win the demands that led to the strike in the first place will simply be lessened". In the last six years TGWU has only had three strikes in this sector, all of which led to dismissal

Nevertheless the union sees these years as having brought many gains for the workers in spite of the limitations. Housing committees have been set up at compounds which have solved many grievances. The union organiser says that faction fights, drunkenness, and general fighting have been curbed where these committees are strong. One of the union's achievements has been the right for sick workers to summon wives or children to look after them in the event of illness or death. The JCC has now provided accommodation for these purposes. The union has also managed to set up "safety committees" at some depots which have seen various improvements in working conditions. The JCC now provides covers for trucks transporting workers to and from worksites, also workers now receive raincoats, and other improvements have definitely come as a result of this. The union sees even further gains now that they have joined the industrial council.

SABMAWU

SABMAWU defines itself broadly as a "state sector" union believing that this is one way in which divisions perpetuated by the state can be overcome. At present the union claims to have membership of over 35,000 although there are also no stop-order facilities and the local authorities component cannot be specified. Branches have been set up all along the Rand, including the Far East Rand region, the East Rand (where the union claims to be strongest), the West Rand areas, the Western Transvaal, and also a JCC branch. The union says that branches in Natal have been lost to NUPS (National Union of Public Servants) or have subsided after they broke away from CUSA in 1985. SABMAWU, like NUM, broke from CUSA just before the formation of COSATU, but remains outside the new federation. The union has a history of militant struggle against local authorities in various areas around Johannesburg. A strike by 700 workers at the Potchefstroom municipality in 1985 resulted in mass arrests and dismissal of the entire workforce. This strike was put

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down with even greater brutality than the 1980 strike. (7) Since then the union has co-ordinated strikes at a number of black local authorities in 1986 including Thokoza, Tembisa, Kagiso, Soweto, Kathlehong, and strikes by hospital workers such as at JG Strydom and Baragwanath.

SABMAWU's progress has developed in waves. At one time the union had a large membership, which declined drastically after the break with CUSA. At the time the union came away virtually bankrupt, the organiser was lost to CUSA and all contact with Natal broken. The recent growth in 1986 has come with the strikes. As such the union's strength, their ability to develop a consistent shop floor presence and negotiating skills remains to be tested. Thus far the union has successfully won reinstatement orders in a number of cases, using the Supreme Court rather than established industrial procedures. Most of these have been won at the black local authorities, raising the likelihood that the reasons for reinstatement were more often political than anything else. The one day strike at Thokoza, for example, was resolved after the Minister of Constitutional Development intervened personally. Explaining the reasons for this the union legal advisor said:

The reason for their response [reinstatement and acceding] to worker demands is probably more political - they didn't want the Council to collapse as happened in Tembisa. The state desperately needs to prove that the BLA-system works". (8)

SABMAWU's militancy has however tested the courts and employers in a number of ways. Legal loopholes, the resort to argument on the basis of common law rights, have been exposed. Employer ignorance, as in the case of Tembisa where reinstatement was achieved on the basis of a judgement declaring the dismissals "unlawful", has also been highlighted. In this case the local authority had failed to comply with the procedural rules for dismissal, which must be done on an individual basis, under the provisions of the Black Local Authorities Staff Relations in Government Gazette No. 2568 of 1983. The effect of the "unlawful dismissal" judgement however does not mean automatic reinstatement. In Tembisa the workers were eventually reinstated because of the inability to find scabs and in the context of generalised political crisis in the township. One of the effects of that particular strike was to result in a total breakdown of the whole local authority structure as the mayor eventually resigned and the community joined the union in pressurising the council. The Tembisa strike was of particular significance too in that the actual power of local authority workers, a

power which goes beyond simply disrupting "essential services" was raised in a real and practical manner. SABMAWU has definitely exposed the weak side of certain local authorities.

Black local authorities

Although the Black Local Authorities (town, village councils) are presented by the state as being on an equal footing with any "white" local authority in the urban areas, the reality is vastly different. The state's refusal historically to subsidise the costs of reproduction of the black working class has seen this unfortunate task devolved onto the shoulders of the BLAs. But they face large areas to service, chronic housing and infrastructural shortages, and a weaker tax base. Not surprisingly the BLAs have experienced permanent fiscal crisis and the attendant ferocity of the community. The quality of services provided generally remains low, whilst BLAs have become more famous for their increasing reliance on repressive measures, most notably through the "blackjacks" (municipal policemen) to resolve the township crisis. Residents are expected to pay exorbitant rental and service rates whilst they believe that what little money there is is wasted on corruption by the councillors.

Within the BLAs employment practices with regard to the staff are extremely poor. Wages are usually lower, whilst forums to discuss or resolve worker grievances are largely absent. There are no industrial councils; the question of granting recognition rights to unions remains couched in uncertainty and confusion. Unions report that councillors seem unsure of the power they have in this regard. This became particularly clear in the Tembisa dispute where the Town Clerk responded to worker grievances by saying that he needed to consult "higher authorities" first. According to SABMAWU, management response to unions organising BLA workers has been characterised by rejection, refusal to discuss wages or working conditions, delaying tactics employed in addressing grievances, and so on. As a result the recent strikes have particularly occurred here. Over the last two years there have been spontaneous stoppages at Kathlehong, Diepmeadow, Soweto Town Council, Kagiso, Dobsonville, Thokoza, and Tembisa. Many of these workers have been members of SABMAWU.

The composition of the workforce indicates the central and growing importance of the "security" section, the blackjacks, now reinforced by the "kitskonstabels". These workers are a strategic part

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of the workforce both in terms of union organising and politically. Often they hold the key to unions' ability to gain access to the rest of the workforce. They guard compounds and workplaces, they are able to monitor the movement of all people entering or leaving council property. The policemen are also important politically as they have been deployed to guard the lives of discredited and unpopular councillors, or to put down unrest. Yet surprisingly it has often been the municipal policemen who have been at the spearhead of strikes over better wages and working conditions. This has been the case in virtually all of the recent strikes. The Kathlehong strike was particularly notable as policemen demonstrated a level of militancy unheard of before. The Sunday Star of 2.11.86 reported that 115 municipal policemen "went beserk" after they demanded a wage increase from R200 to R400 per month. In that particular case these policemen reportedly marched through the streets of the township and were subsequently detained under emergency regulations. What has become clear is that a space for organising the municipal policemen and other BLA workers clearly exists. This task may become more easy, ironically, as the state churns out badly trained, miserably exploited, instant cops. In the Tembisa dispute the workers went even further as they joined hands with the local community in questioning the entire local administration.

The Tembisa strike

Workers at the Tembisa Town Council gathered at the administrative offices on May 19 1986 after they were informed that they would not be paid for heeding two stay-away calls by community groups on April 28 and May 14. The Town Clerk asked workers to elect representatives to discuss their grievances. Apparently seven delegates were immediately elected who then put forward a number of demands, including recognition of their union (SABMAWU), reinstatement of two colleagues dismissed earlier, no pay deductions for observing the stay-aways, dismissal of three white officials who were racist, and pay increased to R700 per month. The mayor responded by telling workers that a union for BLA workers already existed, the Transvaal Association for Employees of Black Local Authorities. Workers claim never to have heard of such a union. Regarding the other grievances the mayor reported that he would consult with authorities in Pretoria first. Workers subsequently gathered at the offices on the 20th, 23rd and 26th of that month. On the 23rd they were informed that a reply to their grievances would only be given on June 23. This was rejected, after which the council read out a general notice of dismissal of the entire workforce. By the 26th a

number of workers congregating outside the offices were teargassed by SADF members. Thereafter municipal policemen living on council premises were forcibly evicted and a large number of workers detained under Emergency regulations.

After three weeks it increasingly became clear that the community were rallying in support of the workers. A Workers Action Committee, comprising members from a number of different community groups, the Tembisa Civic, the Tembisa Working Committee, and some AZAPO members was set up to help co-ordinate support for the striking workers. Students and youth played a role as well, offering to help clear the township of piling rubbish and sewerage. Community support played a major role in preventing the council from employing scabs. According to the union:

They could not get scabs in Tembisa with its population of over half a million, with widespread unemployment, and the entire workforce in detention. They then abused the system set up by the Department of Manpower, this R5 a day system, so they brought in people from Soweto and Sharpeville". (9)

Nevertheless even these scabs were eventually dissuaded from being taken to Tembisa. The union approached people at pick-up points explaining that there was a strike in progress at Tembisa. The community also played a major role in pressurising scabs from other areas to leave. Soon the council couldn't even find scabs to bus in from other areas. Cooperation between the workers and the community eventually saw a transformation of demands on both sides. Council policemen through discussions held with the community ended up expressing support for the rent boycott. At the same time both sides resolved that the Tembisa Town Council should simply resign. In this way, according to the union, links between the council workers low wages, corruption and high rents were drawn. It was resolved that the workers should play a role in pressurising the council members to resign and to monitor their activities. Three months later the council eventually decided to reinstate all the workers, however original demands have still not been met. At the time about 600 workers were still in detention. In the interim the cost to the council had been very great. No-one was prepared to evict rent boycotters, administrative work ground to a halt, and a number of councillors eventually resigned. This included the mayor, Mr L L Mothibe.

The level of awareness amongst the workers has clearly increased. On February 11 this year council policemen once again came out on

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strike, this time demanding the resignation of one of the new Administrators - Mr More - appointed by the state in the wake of the collapse of the council. Union reports on that day stated that "our members have no confidence in this man. They are dissatisfied with the way he handled wage demands. They told us that the council has no money, but he demanded a R150,000 mayoral car". (10) Newspaper headlines called it a "Municipal Mutiny" and expressed surprise at the role of the council policemen. As a result of these demands Mr More and another official have reportedly been suspended.

Developments in Tembisa have clearly demonstrated the kind of power local authority workers can actually have. Their role as providers of "services" to the community is increasingly being interpreted in a manner which takes account of the needs of the community first, not their bosses. Workers are beginning to understand the impact of such services on the community and are now beginning to appreciate this responsibility. This represents a direct challenge to the myth of "neutral" services provided. SABMAWU says that their union calls this inculcating a sense of responsibility towards the community. As local authority unions they claim that they are in the privileged position of having access to these workers, something not easily done by community groups.

Towards one national union

The new local authorities union, due to be launched later this year by COSATU - incorporating the important Cape Town Municipal Workers Association - marks an important turning point in the process of consolidating union organisation in this sector. Other unions to form part of the merger include the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU) and South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU). The total estimated membership of these unions however indicates that the large proportion of local authority workers continue to remain unorganised. The new union will include about 40,000 of the 138,000 black workers within this sector. The problem of lack of unity, unions like SABMAWU and NUPS, which remain outside of the new federation will also present further obstacles to union consolidation in this area, particularly in the Transvaal region. A number of difficult challenges face the new union: fragmented bargaining structures; the problem of in-house unions; low wages; racist abuse and bad working conditions. Present attempts to privatise various aspects of service provision must also be looked at. The problem of employer abuse of unemployment, the increasing

resort to "casual" labour as a money saving device possibly presents the most serious immediate problem. JOC labour statistics indicate that already more than 50% of the labour force are designated as "casual". In addition the JOC has virtually stopped recruiting from traditional labour markets in the last four years. Many more urban women workers are being drawn in, on a casual basis, to do the work traditionally done by migrant men. Casualisation and privatisation constitute a serious threat to workers' job security and by implication to the unions. The use of daily casuals, on the R5 a day basis is also increasing. These workers are not entitled to any pensions benefits, they may be easily retrenched, and in the present context are even "cheaper" than migrants. The municipality does not have to subsidise the costs of day to day reproduction and saves on transport provided in recruiting workers from distant rural areas.

In the long term the union will have to unite all local authorities workers and work towards a situation where present legal prohibitions on the right to strike can be challenged. Local authority unions also have a very special and close relationship with community struggles, as was indicated in the Tembisa strike, and hold a very important political role in relation to the staffing of the state apparatus.

Footnotes

1. Interview with MGWUSA, February 1987
2. M Golding, "Workers in the state sector", SALB 10.8, 1985, p 43
3. "The struggle for trade union democracy: the case of the JMCEU", SALB 10.8, 1985, p 32
4. M Golding, "Workers in the state sector", p 49
5. "Company unionism - the JMCEU revisited", SALB 11.1, 1985, p 50
6. "The struggle for trade union democracy", p 33
7. "Potchestroom municipality strike", SALB 10.5, 1985, p 18
8. Interview with SABMAWU, January 1987
9. *ibid*
10. The Star Africa News Service 12.2.87