

Njikelana on SAAWU

Shortly before his most recent detention by the Ciskeian authorities, SAAWU national vice-president SISA NJIKELANA spoke to Glenn Moss about the union.



The South African Allied Workers' Union - SAAWU - is worried about its distorted media image. In particular, its description as a 'community oriented' trade union is causing the organisation concern, and national vice-president Sisa Njikelana says that he does not understand what the term means when applied to SAAWU. If it implies that the union has neglected shop floor structures and organisation for community or political activity, Njikelana rejects this.

'SAAWU', he argues, 'has only been able to survive state repression because of its well-established shop floor structures. Our aim is to establish shop floor structures

inside the factories, which have been able to maintain the existence of SAAWU and through which we have been able to organically develop leadership'.

This does not mean that SAAWU is uninvolved in community and broader political issues: for example, the union participated in the 1981 anti-Republic Day campaign, and was involved in a Durban bus boycott. SAAWU has responded to Ciskei 'independence' and harassment of unions and, more recently, participated in the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF).

Njikelana says this 'is not a matter of involving the organisation because we would like a name for it'. Such involvement is based on the union's carefully worked out Declaration of Principles which states that 'Only the working class, in alliance with other progressive-minded sections of the community, can build a happy life for all South Africans'.

According to Njikelana, 'the least politically minded worker in the organisation knows that as a worker, he is affected by community issues. There is a relation between the rent he has to pay and the wages he receives; a relation between the bus fare hike, educational and medical costs, and the wage he gets. Obviously, we see the community organisations as being the viable structures which workers can vent these aspirations through. But where it is necessary for SAAWU to be part and parcel of certain community activities, it is policy to do so. A very good example would be the response to Ciskei repression which has nothing to do with the factory floor, and the Durban bus boycott. These issues affect SAAWU members. Bus fare hikes are something people expect to be taken up by community organisations but who goes to the industrial areas by bus? It's the workers'.

Some labour commentators have

suggested that SAAWU's 'non-industrial structure' will not allow the union to fit comfortably into current moves to forge trade union unity within a new federation. While Njikelana admits that SAAWU currently acts as a general union, he points out that constitutionally SAAWU is a federation committed to the formation of industrial unions. However, SAAWU believes that industrial unions are best formed on the base of already established factory floor structures. 'While workers in South Africa might have been unionised to an extent previously, it wouldn't be feasible to allocate them into industrial unions from the very onset. We see industrial unions as bodies or sub-structures of a federation which would have their own leaders. We reason that the kind of leadership that would assume positions in these industrial unions must be capable not just of electing people into positions for the sake of establishing structures. One needs organic development of leaders from the factory floor to assume leadership in the industrial unions, and to be capable of running their own offices, administration, finances and all that'.

SAAWU is unwilling to predict when they will establish their first industrial union. Njikelana points to the relative youth of the organisation, which has existed for only four years. Its origins lie in the March 1979 conference of the Black Allied Workers' Union (BAWU) where, according to Njikelana, those BAWU branches present voted to dissolve BAWU and form the non-racial SAAWU. (Njikelana insists that SAAWU was not a splinter or break-away from BAWU, as is often claimed. He says that branches not present at the 1979 BAWU conference did not accept the decision to disband, and have maintained themselves under the name of BAWU).

Njikelana believes that state action against SAAWU has slowed down plans for the formation of industrial unions. 'Much as we would like to give a time period, state repression has played its role in interrupting our programme. But we are close to the establishment of a chemical union due to the level of organisation we have in chemical factories'. Repression has not just focused on leadership 'but on membership as well. That's why SAAWU stresses that branches must

try and develop themselves in order to survive, which has happened'.

SAAWU has signed a number of recognition agreements in East London, the Transvaal and Natal. For example, the Kempton Park branch, 'young as it is has signed five recognition agreements, and there are still quite a number in the pipeline, at all branches. But there are a number of difficulties: shortage of manpower, victimisation and harassment in each factory. We don't believe in signing a recognition agreement whilst the workers are relatively weak, even though we have a factory floor structure. For us, a factory floor structure goes hand in hand with the organised strength of workers in that particular factory. So we have, in some areas, more de facto recognitions than official recognition agreements'.

Some reports have suggested that SAAWU is an unwilling participant in the current feasibility committee looking at trade union unity. Njikelana says that 'SAAWU is aware, especially in commercial press reports, of their allegedly reluctant participation in the unity feasibility meetings. We are very concerned about such distorted and propagandistic labellings. They serve to tarnish the image of the organisation'. Njikelana points out that, while SAAWU would not go for unity at all costs, it is 'one of the trade unions which needs unity more than ever, in view of the repression and harassment that we have experienced. SAAWU, at the fourth trade union summit, agreed to be part and parcel of the feasibility committee. It is one of the organisations which agreed in principle to the foundation of a federation'.

In much the same way, SAAWU is sensitive about the suggestion that they have non-negotiable preconditions for unity. A recent article on trade union unity argued that SAAWU's 'conditions for unity, political and organisational approach, and non-industrial structure all appear unlikely to fit comfortably alongside those other organisations (seeking unity)' (WIP 27:4). Njikelana disagrees: 'This would indicate that we are dogmatic and uncompromising, that we are not prepared to establish unity with other organisations. The way it is put is as if our conditions

are in conflict with the conditions of the other unions who have already reached a consensus'.

Njikelana points out that no-one has specified what SAAWU's supposed preconditions for unity are, and how they conflict with positions held by the other unions involved. He sees this as another instance of the distorted labelling which SAAWU has been a victim of.

He accepts that there are differences between some of the unions seeking unity - but the consultations, exchange of ideas, arguments and disagreements are part of the process of working out mechanisms of unity by groups committed in principle to a new federation of trade unions.

However, he reacts strongly against the idea that consensus has been reached by most unions, and that it is only SAAWU and a few 'community oriented' unions which are not part of the consensus. There is general agreement on the formation of a new federation - and differences are over mechanisms rather than principles.

'We are different organisations with parallel and slightly different policies and structures. So there is the feasibility committee, building us all together to exchange views and ideas on exactly how we go about making progress on unity. SAAWU was there at the first summit, and it's going to be there at the October feasibility meeting. I'm not saying there aren't differences, but it is for us trade unions to iron these out, to come up with something productive, to make practical endeavours in the direction of unity'.

Late last year, SAAWU took part in informal negotiations at an unofficial meeting of the industrial council for the chemical industry. However, Njikelana insists that this does not represent a shift in SAAWU's position on industrial council participation. This instance of informal discussions with the industrial council related to very specific conditions at AECI's Umbogintwini plant, where SAAWU has a majority of members and a workers committee. The industrial council was negotiating minimum wages and working conditions at all AECI plants, and as SAAWU was organised at only the Umbogontwini plant, it was very difficult to ignore totally the industrial council proceedings.

SAAWU continues to abide by the Langa summit on industrial councils, which rejected the present industrial council system as an unacceptable means of collective bargaining. The Langa meeting 'recommended that unions that are not members of industrial councils should not enter any industrial council and requested that participating unions refer this back to their respective unions for endorsement. The unions agreed to support each other in the event of any union resisting participation on the industrial council'.

Njikelana and other SAAWU leaders are clearly worried about what they see as a false categorisation of the union. 'A lot of reference has been made to SAAWU being in the group of the community oriented unions, with loose structures and less interest in the factory floor. This would imply that we would be some kind of square peg in a round hole when it comes to a new federation. But we know we are building shop floor structures. And SAAWU will be at the October meeting of the feasibility committee, as we have been at previous unity talks'.