



Looking for unity — delegates at the meeting of independent unions at Ipelegeng Community Centre, Soweto

Huge gathering of unions

ALMOST all of this country's independent trade union movement converged on Soweto on June 9 and 10 to discuss forming a wider unity.

The meeting was called by the unions which have already committed themselves to forming a new super federation in the very near future.

The feasibility committee, formed after the April 1983 unity meeting at Athlone near Cape Town, has now completed its task and has drawn up a draft constitution for the new federation.

But, before taking the final steps toward the federation's inaugural congress, the unity unions decided to see whether

it was not possible to achieve an even wider unity in the interests of furthering the working class struggle.

So, the unions, which had initially been part of the feasibility committee plus others which have sprung up since April 1983, were invited to attend the Soweto meeting.

With over 200 delegates from 42 unions attending, this was the first mass gathering of South Africa's independent trade union movement.

The unions at the meeting were from varying political positions — some support black consciousness organisations, others support the United Democratic Front, and then

still others, like FOSATU, choose to remain independent.

In order to encourage as much worker participation as possible, unions were urged to send worker delegates to the meeting. Many of the FOSATU unions brought along their entire executive committees.

Differences

And one of the most significant features of the Soweto meeting was workers' desire to see the new federation get off the ground as soon as possible.

However, differences began to emerge on what should be the basic principles of this new federation.

Cape Town Municipal Work-

ers Association's John Ernstzen outlined the five principles which had been agreed upon by the unity unions. These were: worker control; industrial unionism; non-racialism; membership to be based on paid-up membership; and finally national co-operation between the unions affiliated to the federation.

Significantly, the issue of industrial unionism, which earlier in the unity talks was a stumbling block for the general unions, seemed to be less of a problem. Most appreciated the importance of converting into industrially-based unions.

This time, though, non-racialism was the major issue,

particularly for the black consciousness-linked Azanian Congress of Trade Unions.

Majority

But, at the end of the day, the majority of the unions (about 30) stated that they had 'no problems' with the five principles. Some of those who could not commit themselves to the principles immediately either had 'internal problems' or had to refer them back to their members.

The Soweto unity meeting has paved the way for further discussions with these unions about the possibility of their joining the new super federation.

Two unions' merger plans

MERGER talks between FOSATU's Transport and General Workers Union and the General Workers Union are at an advanced stage and could lead to a new 20 000-strong union being formed soon.

And it is understood that similar talks are taking place between the Food and Canning Workers Union and FOSATU's Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union.

These merger discussions have emerged out of the increased cooperation between the unity unions.

TGWU's general secretary, Jane Barrett, told FOSATU Worker News that in August last year delegates from both unions' executive committees met to test whether there was a possibility of a merger.

'At that meeting we just discussed where we were organising,' she said.

The two unions met again

just before the Soweto unity talks. This time the full executive committees attended the meeting.

'We discussed how we could assist each other in organising factories in companies where the other is organised.'

'For example, GWU is organised at Everite in the Cape, so we have now set aside an organiser to organise the Everite factory in the Transvaal,' Sister Barrett said.

Jane Barrett and GWU's general secretary, Dave Lewis, were asked to examine both unions' constitutions and draw up a draft constitution for the merged union.

Sister Barrett said neither unions had given 'formal notification' of merger, however 'we hope to meet again in a few months and if all goes well we could merge either late this year or early next year'.

Transport workers to fight for shorter hours



A male choir from Sizanani MaZulu Transport sings at the AGM

NATAL transport workers pledged to fight for shorter working hours at their annual general meeting held on May 26 at the Lay Ecumenical Centre near Pietermaritzburg.

Union speakers pointed out that unlike most other industries, the legal working hours for both passenger and goods transport services was still 48 hours per week.

On top of this, long haul drivers and ferry drivers are often forced to work an excessive amount of overtime, often with

insufficient sleep, they said.

Workers at the meeting pledged to curb excessive overtime and to fight for proper weekends and for the 'spread-over' shifts in passenger transport to be shortened to 12 hours.

Over 1 000 workers from as far afield as Port Shepstone and Newcastle attended this Transport and General Workers Union annual general meeting. A bus-load of workers also came down from the

Transvaal.

The plight of Kwa Mashu's women street cleaners, who earlier in the meeting performed Mpondo dances, was also discussed. These women earn only R65 a month!

In a resolution, the meeting promised to fight against the undercutting of unskilled workers' wage levels by local authorities.

The resolution also confirmed the union's commitment to win improved maternity rights for women workers.