

COSATU construction workers union

The launch of the Construction and Allied Workers Union (CAWU) on January 31 of this year marks a further step towards COSATU's objective of "one union one industry". CAWU is the third union after Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) to have merged.

The new union claims approximately 30,000 building and construction workers nationally. Present at the launch were delegates from 5 formally constituted CAWU branches - Northern Natal, Witwatersrand, Southern Natal, Western Province, and Phalaborwa - as well as members from Pretoria/Pietersburg, Bloemfontein, and the Eastern Cape who were present with observer status.

The seven unions which have contributed members towards the merger include the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU), the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU), Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), National General Workers union (NGWU), General Workers Union of South Africa (GWUSA), and the Brick Clay and Allied Workers Union (BRICKAWU).

According to CAWU members joint meetings have been held in the various regions since June 1986. By November a number of branches had been constituted and branch executive committee members elected. Unfortunately the Eastern Cape region could not participate in the joint meetings at first due to the number of unionists who were either in detention or in hiding in that area. By the time of the launch the Eastern Cape branch had still not been established.

An interim national executive committee has now been elected. The committee consists of one co-ordinator for each of the seven unions represented. Office bearers include: (President) David Ngcobo, a shopsteward from Grinaker and former MAWU NEC member; (Vice-President) Phineas Hlongwane, a shopsteward at Alex Murray and formerly a member of BRICKAWU; (Treasurer) Billy Sebola, shopsteward at Pioneer Concrete and former GAWU member; (General Secretary) Desmond Mahasha, formerly a GAWU organiser.

The present office bearers have the task of assisting the formation of branches which have not yet been constituted, and to strengthen and consolidate CAWU structures nationally. They will eventually

give way to a permanent national executive committee due to be elected at a "constitutional congress" which will be held later in the year. According to Desmond Mahasha, interim General Secretary of the new union, the next congress may see certain amendments to the present constitution. It will also have tighter representation, based on proportional voting rights. "We are hoping to establish only six CAWU branches nationally, meaning that the Transvaal region may have to divide into two big branches".(1)

Resolutions

A number of resolutions were adopted. These included:

- * that the union will apply for registration in terms of the Labour Relations Act. The question of registration initially presented some difficulty, especially for some members of SAAWU and GAWU, unions with a tradition of opposition to registration. However it was eventually decided to opt for registration because this has failed to "rope and control worker organisations" and also because of the nature of the industry. The industry is "migratory and as a result it would be difficult to collect subscription fees without stop order facilities".
- * The union will strive for financial self-sufficiency and will establish national control over all finances. There is also to be no formal affiliation to any international body.
- * On working class leadership, CAWU noted that: "The working class is the most oppressed and exploited class and has no interest in maintaining a society based on oppression and exploitation". Further, the needs of workers can only be met in a society run by workers in the interests of workers, ie. a socialist society". It was therefore stated that CAWU would "strive to ensure the leadership of workers in every struggle being waged by the oppressed people of our land". (2)

The union is to follow the general political policy of COSATU, namely that the problems of workers and those of the community are inseparable. It is therefore stated that the union will "actively participate in the struggle for a free, non-racial, and democratic South Africa. This it is stressed should be done by "taking up political struggles through the membership and structures at local, regional, and national level in alliance with progressive community and political organisations and under the leadership of the working class". A third point argues that the "union will strive to ensure that members effectively participate in progressive organisations and campaigns that conduct struggles

against oppression and exploitation". (3)

According to Desmond Mahasha the guiding principle that brought the many diverse unions together was that of "one union one industry". The other principle, according to him, was a commitment to "total workers control and the recognition of the need to have strong shop floor structures".

Conditions in the industry

Bringing together workers in the building and construction industry is no easy task. The industry is diverse (see SALB 11.6 on BCAWU) consisting of workers employed in Building and Construction, Civil Engineering and Construction (eg. road-building), the manufacturing sector which essentially involves Heavy Clay and Allied products (eg. brick and tile making), and workers employed in Stone Crushing. In addition the industry is characterised by seasonal and economic fluctuations and the dispersed nature of work sites. This is compounded by the high number of migrant and casual labourers. Mahasha explained the problem, "Often employers after completing a certain project retrench the entire workforce and then recruit a new workforce at the next site. We have noticed that increasingly women are being taken on, on a casual basis, so that they are not entitled to sick pay, unemployment benefits, and sometimes even compensation in the event of an accident or injury. These workers are usually in remote areas and they know very little of their rights. In these areas employers are paying R60 a fortnight". (4) Working conditions in the industry are also very bad, Billy Sebola at the launch reminded other workers; "We face the most oppressive and inhumane treatment. Daily we are sworn at, we are the workers who are still called Kaffirs. To meet construction deadlines we have to push our bodies to the limits of our strength". (5)

CAWU faces a number of challenges, the most important of which is probably the fight for a living wage. Construction workers are presently receiving an average minimum wage of R1.70 per hour. (6) The other big problem is that of retrenchments. In recent years the industry, hit by an over-supplied market in residential accommodation (whites) and office space has been suffering a severe depression. The two biggest employers associations, the Building Industry Federation of South Africa (BIFSA) and South African Federation of Civil Engineers (SAFCEC) have estimated job losses in their industries as 75,000 and 40,000 since 1982. The period July 1985 to July 1986 saw overall job losses in the construction

industry of 9,700. (7)

However recent state plans to improve township infrastructure and increased manufacture of low cost housing (for blacks) is likely to usher in a slight upturn for the industry. For management the high rate of job losses in the last few years has also presented some difficulties. Retrenched workers do not often return to the work site with the result that labour costs tend to be pushed up during the next upswing. It is therefore possible that 1987/8 may represent a period of renewed investment for the industry, a process which may also strengthen worker bargaining power. At the same time Ron McLennan, President of SAFCEC, foresees a decline in heavy engineering projects in the next year. (8) A large proportion of the workforce is concentrated in heavy construction.



photo: delegates and workers at the launch of CAWU

[Afrapix]

For CAWU the battle against retrenchments will most likely continue, as employers deliberately use this to weaken workers. "We reject retrenchments and would prefer transfers together with

accomodation allowances for workers when projects are finished", says Mahasha. The other priority facing the union is that of achieving more recognition agreements and the right to automatic stop-order deductions. "Some of our members have obtained recognition agreements in certain areas (eg. MAWU members from Northern Natal) but this is not the case for everyone". (9)

For CAWU the way forward is not going to be easy. The 30,000 members who make up the new union are a small proportion of the potential workforce within the industry. Central Statistical Service figures for July 1986 quote the total workforce at about 303,900. In the PWV-area CAWU also has to face the existence of the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU), one of CUSA-AZACTU's largest affiliates. BCAWU claims a total membership of 45,000 of which 22,000 are paid up. (see SALB 12.1) Responding to this, Mahasha says, "our long term aim is to unite all the workers in one industry. Nevertheless the question of unity with BCAWU is something which can be resolved, by the leadership of both COSATU and CUSA-AZACTU. At present our wish is to see all the workers united".

Notes

1. Interview with Desmond Mahasha, Tuesday February 3 1987
2. CAWU Resolutions, adopted on January 31 1987
3. *ibid*
4. Interview with Mahasha
5. Billy Sebola, quoted in COSATU Head office press statement, February 2 1987
6. *ibid*
7. "A Profile of the Building and Construction Industry", unpublished report, Sept 1986, p 4
8. *ibid*, taken from SAFCEC Annual General Meeting, Sept 1986
9. Interview with Mahasha, *ibid*.

(Coletane Markham, February 1987)