

SALB: Your union has given an ultimatum to employers and the government to meet demands by May 1. Are you in a position to carry out national protest action?

Ms Nlapo: No, we are not in that position. We are not really that well organised. The other problem is the influence of Inkatha, and their union UWUSA, amongst our members. This is particularly bad in the Natal branch, but also here in Johannesburg. The battle is going to be difficult, our main struggle can really be with employers at present. They must be educated, our workers must be educated. Our union is using the courts at the moment, usually on the basis of workers common law rights. This however gives power to the individual worker, not to the union.

Notes

1. Taken from True Love February 1987
2. Union resolutions, political policy, adopted at UWC on November 29 1986
3. Interview with Margaret Nlapo, general secretary of the Johannesburg branch, February 9 1987

(Coletane Markham, February 1987)

National Union of Railway Workers launch

On November 29 and 30 of last year, some 600 railway workers gathered at the Ipelegeng Centre in Soweto to launch the National Union of Railway Workers (NURW). Present were delegates from most parts of the country: East London, Port Elizabeth, Western Cape, PWV, Eastern Transvaal, Western Transvaal and Northern Natal. The establishment of the national union is the culmination of a process which began with the founding, independently of each other, of worker committees in different parts of the country from early 1986. These committees relied on the initiatives of workers themselves and came to stress principles of worker control and participation. The new union continues these traditions and has said that whilst it is open to talks with other unions operating in the sector, "our precondition for unity with any union will be that we

guarantee an industry-based democratically-controlled union will emerge." (For a background to organising and trade unions on the railways see SALB 12.1)

The new union claimed an initial signed up membership of 5,000, although they say that this figure may well have doubled since the launch especially after a mass meeting in East London held on January 17, when 2-3,000 new members were signed up.

Office bearers

Delegates present at the launch elected the following officers: Mr M Nemasetoni (President); Mr P Mangoloti (Vice-president); Mr Manjezu (Treasurer); Mr Andre van der Haar (General secretary) and Mr M Madasi (Assistant general secretary).

Resolutions and debate

Resolutions passed by the founding conference include:

- * To unite all workers in the railways, airways and harbours of South Africa into one union.
- * To strive towards one union on the railways.
- * To educate workers about their rights in the workplace.
- * To ensure workers control of the union.
- * To fight to scrap job reservation and apartheid in the South African Transport Services and to improve on the bad working conditions.
- * The NURW will strive to work hand in hand with all progressive democratic organisations.
- * Staff associations should be abolished seeing that they work for the interests of the government... They are not democratic. Workers have no say in them and do not even know who these officials are. We did not elect them so they have no mandate from us. That is why the government likes them.

INTERVIEW

The following interview was conducted by the South African Labour Bulletin with office bearers of the NURW on January 21.

SALB: Around what issues have the workers on the railways been mobilised?

NURW: Primarily around the bad conditions and low wages which are usually worse than for private industry. For instance our workers have no rights to UIF and are not covered by the Workmens Compensation Act. Also on the railways, workers do not have the basic rights that workers in other industries have won: there is no freedom of association and workers are forced into staff associations which serve the interests of management. That is why we have called on the officials in these bodies to resign their positions.

Also, on the railways, racism and discrimination is still very strong. You have the situation where black workers and whites are doing the same job under a different name, but are paid very different rates. So you have the white marshall and the black shunter, the ticket collector (black) and the train conductor (white); the white checkers and the black sorters, and so on.

Although these are the immediate concerns, the long term objective of the union is to participate fully in the broader workers struggle against apartheid and economic exploitation.

SALB: The SATS is well known for its efforts to divide workers both on racial grounds and according to grades. How has this affected the union?

NURW: It is our policy to organise all workers on the railways. But apartheid is still terrible. For instance we cannot even enter the white canteen to talk to them. In the longterm we will break that down. But it is impractical at this stage. Even amongst black workers - as expected - the higher grades are still holding back for fear of management reprisals.

SALB: What are the origins of the National Union of Railway Workers?

NURW: Early last year a number of independent workers committees were established: in East London, Port Elizabeth, Western Cape, Johannesburg and Klerksdorp. These were established and run by the workers themselves in those areas. But it was increasingly realised that it was necessary to unite our forces if we were to pose a feasible challenge to the SATS bosses and to have a chance of changing the intolerable working conditions. At that time meetings were held with all workers regardless of political or union affiliation. So there were members present from SARHWU [South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union, a COSATU affiliate] and

ARAHWU [African Railway and Harbour Workers Union, a CUSA-AZACTU affiliate].

In September a "national interim committee" was formed which applied to affiliate to COSATU and for assistance. It was intended to convene a national conference to include members of all the unions currently operating on the railways, on the basis that only workers were to be represented. It was at that stage we found out that SARHWU was to be re-launched.

SALB: It has been argued, by trade unionists sympathetic towards NURW that if you want to be affiliated to COSATU you should have joined SARHWU and worked from within that body. What were the objections to this course of action?

NURW: There was a lot of talk along these lines, but when we looked into SARHWU we found there was little worker control in that body. The executive was in fact made up of officials from another union and it had no proper constitution. Even though SARHWU has now opened offices in other areas it was concentrated largely in the Johannesburg area; it was not a national union. We would have liked to work together to build a truly national union.

In the meantime we felt it was strategically necessary to launch the NURW in order to seek wider unity and in order to provide organisation and education for our members.

Also we saw the failure of unions within COSATU to merge and unite. If even SARHWU and TGWU [Transport and General Workers Union] could not find common ground over organising the railways, we would end up being torn between the two, part of an internal battle.

SALB: Have you considered merging with TGWU, a union with a long history of democratic organisation?

NURW: We have had contact with TGWU on this issue. However, we believe there is a crucial difference between organising transport workers generally, especially in the private sector, and organising SATS workers who fall under the public sector. Before you are in a position to pressurise management - in this case SATS which is backed by the state - it is necessary to organise the entire industry. This is why we believe in the need for a national railway union.

SALB: The old General Workers Union, which was involved in organising railway workers in Port Elizabeth in 1982, was defeated

by intransigent SATS management when their members took strike action. The GWU also concluded that national organisation was required, but they went further. They argued that this would only be achieved through massive solidarity and resources that could only be mobilised by a large union federation. Does not the NURW need this kind of backing to win against such a powerful management?

NURW: Remember that there were only a few hundred workers involved in that strike. It is precisely why we intend to unite all railway, harbour and airways workers under one union. We need such an organisation which will also need the support of other worker organisations on a large scale. We intend to be part of a large union federation. But we have come to realise that the only effective method of organising on the railways is for railway workers themselves to take the initiative. It is true that there are extra problems facing railway workers because of the nature of the railways management. Harrassment is a big problem and two of our organisers were recently detained in Bloemfontein.

SALB: What will be the political directon of the new union?

NURW: We welcome all workers irrespective of political leanings. We do not want to be one-sided supporting one political organisation only as happens with SARHWU and ARAHWU. But this does not mean we are neutral on political questions. We will address these issues at the point of action and where our members are affected we will be participating. We inform members of all significant events and encourage them to participate in the general workers struggle at all levels. But workers themselves must have the ammunition to decide on political direction. We must make sure that when clashes occur over political direction workers will have a forum in which to debate these, something which is seriously lacking.

Members have already made it known that we are to draw up a programme in which we can be part of the struggle to bring about the unbanning of banned organisations, the release of political prisoners, and the end of apartheid and political oppression, through working hand in hand with progressive organisations including student, youth and women's organisations.