

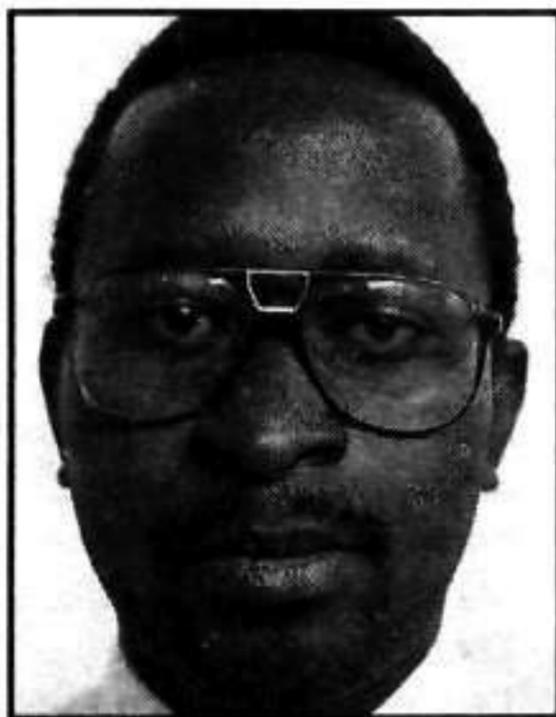
The user-friendly post office will remain a pipe dream while racism reigns behind the counters, say Post and Telecommunication Workers Association (POTWA) members. Jeppe St Post Office workers believe commercialisation is putting their jobs on the line. They speak to SNUKI ZIKALALA.

## Commercialisation of Post and Telecommunications: racism and retrenchments

On 1 October 1992, TELKOM and SAPOS celebrated the first anniversary of their official separation. Though the state is currently the only shareholder in both companies, we believe it is preparing to privatise them once they become profitable.

We are totally against privatisation and we are not going to let the two companies sell state shares to private companies. Posts and telecommunications is a public sector and as such is supposed to serve the nation. At the same time the service should be affordable.

We think commercialisation will result in mass retrenchments. TELKOM and SAPOS have stopped recruiting and training new personnel. The two companies demand a lot from us and now they talk of overstaffing. We fear a number of black workers



*Shultz Ramaila, a shopsteward at Jeppe St Post Office*

*Photo: William Matlala*

are going to lose their jobs. TELKOM and SAPOS must first consider retrenching whites of pensionable age before looking at us.

As workers, we understand the state could not sell posts and telecommunications in its present form. The buildings are dilapidated, the service poor, and the sectors are structured in

a racist fashion.

With the current state of affairs, prospective buyers cannot commit themselves. They would have to invest too much money in refurbishing the buildings, installing new technology, training, retraining and improving the quality of service.

### **No motivation**

The past 12 months have been very hectic. The two companies are very demanding. Despite our lack of training in, for example, customer service, we are expected to be lively, well developed, eager and ambitious – and at all times ready to satisfy the customer.

The quality service demanded from us will not be effected now. The management has to introduce motivational programmes for our staff. There is nothing to motivate us. We are still

being badly treated by our white colleagues.

As long as we are being neglected and not consulted on various issues that affect our performance and productivity, our level of efficiency will be low.

As a state institute, posts and telecommunications has been a home for the privileged whites. The majority of them hardly have Standard 8, yet they have received preferential treatment in promotions, training and recruiting.

In the past, if you were a black clerk in these sectors, you were expected to know your place. This is still the case, but in a disguised form. We feel insecure behind those counters and always have to fight naked racism in the workplace.

As workers, we believe conditions of employment are important. We cannot be productive and deliver a quality service if our working conditions are abnormal. There should be workshops on worker-to-worker relationships.

TELKOM and SAPOS are trying to become much more customer focused.

Commercialisation has taught them that otherwise they will not stay in business. But again, the internal dynamics of posts and telecommunications must be properly addressed before the two companies can achieve their goals.

### **Structural changes**

Commercialisation has brought about a number of structural changes. The title

'clerk' which was used for black workers has been replaced with 'counter officer'. Duties of a counter officer include financial transactions and dispatches. Workers who sort the mail are now called 'handlers'.

But the mail handlers and the counter officers do not earn the same salary. Most mail handlers are blacks (coloureds, Indians and Africans) while most counter officers are white.

More black superintendents who have neither say nor power have been appointed. They are being disregarded by their white counterparts and cannot tell white workers what to do. They even panic or blush in front of these junior employees instead of disciplining them if there is a need.

'Flexibility' is another concept that makes us less competitive and efficient. We are always expected to stand in for our colleagues who are ill or absent from work.

Though it is good to be familiar with various jobs and responsibilities, we are opposed to being shifted from one place of work to the other. This does not happen with our white counterparts.

### **Merit assessments**

As black workers, we are assessed every six months so we are under more pressure than our white colleagues who are evaluated only after a year. They have the privilege of staying in one place for a longer period without being

changed or evaluated.

Black seniors who are supposed to represent us only attend meetings and never take part in decision-making. Despite the fact that they are in charge of us, and are in contact with us, they are always told what to do by their white counterparts.

White supervisors, some of whom have never seen nor talked to us, have the right to assess us. It is really unfair.

Some black counter clerks for 15 years have never been commended for their service. It is only those who are blue-eyed boys of the managers and those who agree to denigrate themselves by cutting a senior supervisor's grass over the weekend who get patted on the back.

Some blacks, who are university graduates, are placed on counter points where they do not belong. Their academic knowledge is not utilised properly. They could play a very progressive role in changing the whole structure of the former racist institution. They are young, energetic and innovative.

Although we are against privatisation, we believe that if the companies are sincere and have the interests of customers at heart, they should start addressing problems which have been caused by the apartheid regime. It is only through worker participation and consultation that TELKOM and SAPOS will learn how to redress the past and achieve a quality service in their sectors." ☆