

# Split or splinter?

## *breakaway from SACCAWU*

Report by ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

**M**ike Tsotetsi is a soft spoken man who strikes you as sincere about what he believes in. He never raises his voice or loses his cool when asked 'provocative' questions. Tsotetsi was Wits regional secretary of SACCAWU when he was suspended on 10 June last year and subsequently dismissed in November. Tsotetsi is now the main, visible figure behind a new union, the Clerical, Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (CCCAWUSA), which he runs with other former SACCAWU officials.

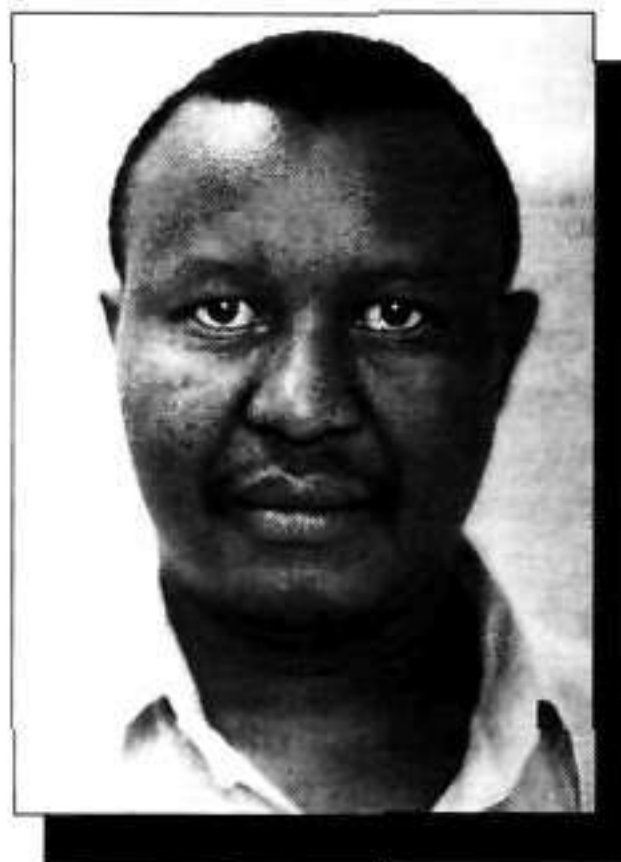
Tsotetsi admits that his dismissal was linked to charges that he was mobilising Joshua Doore group workers to withhold their subscriptions from SACCAWU, which charges he denies.

But Papi Kganare, general secretary of SACCAWU, says that one of the Joshua Doore shopstewards "spilled the beans" about this campaign. Tsotetsi held a meeting with about eight Joshua Doore shopstewards and encouraged them to stop paying their subscriptions to the union. A special NEC meeting decided to suspend him and five others who were involved in this campaign, says Kganare. After he was suspended, he continued to present himself as a union official, he addressed workers and negotiated with the Joshua Doore bosses on behalf of SACCAWU. An inquiry was held in November at which he was dismissed.

Tsotetsi says his union started operating in January this year and will be launched at the end of February. "The main reason for forming a union was because of the grievances that I and other Wits regional organisers had about the general administration of SACCAWU and the lack of services to members," says Tsotetsi. His new

union will "cater for the interests of those neglected and unorganised workers in the industry". He lists Spar supermarkets, workers in small towns and businesses that employ a small number of workers as potential members for his new union. "We will not necessarily go out to organise SACCAWU members. We are not membership thirsty," says Tsotetsi. "But if disgruntled SACCAWU members approach us to join, we will enrol them when we are convinced that they have genuine reasons of wanting to leave SACCAWU. After all, we believe in freedom of association for workers."

Kganare maintains that the foundation of Tsotetsi's union can be traced back to May last year. "This was when officials like Tsotetsi and former assistant general secretary Kaizer Thibedi held meetings with a Pretoria-based splinter



**Mike Tsotetsi**

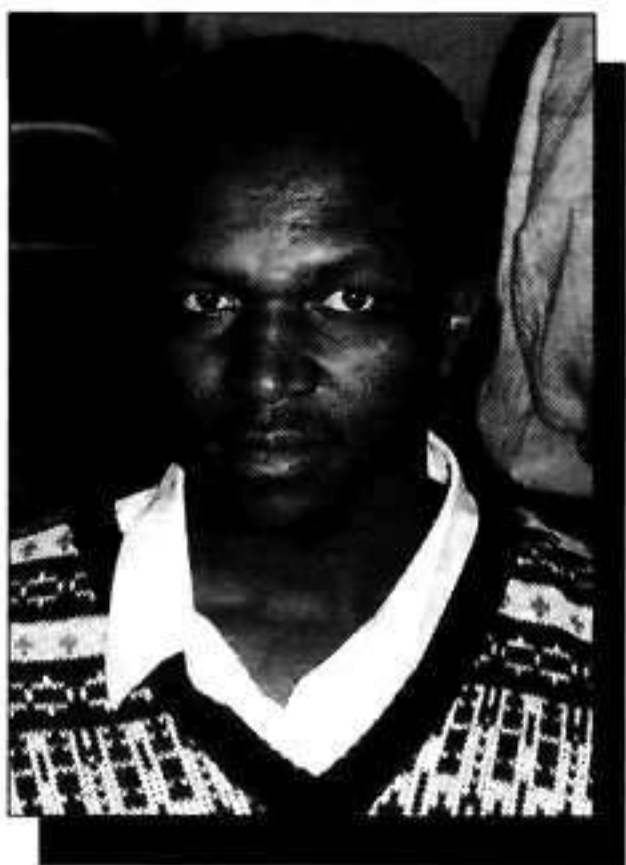
union," says Kganare. They were hoping to join forces with this union, to destabilise SACCAWU.

Kganare admits there were malpractices in the financial affairs of the union, but these related to the failure by finance officers in the head office to keep proper records of the union. "The three finance officials were instructed to

provide these records to the auditors, and when they failed to do so were dismissed from the union," says Kganare.

Tsotetsi claims that his union has 4 800 members, including members of the Entertainment Workers Union, which has now merged with it. But Kganare insists that Tsotetsi and his group have failed to sway workers from the Joshua Doore group to join his union. "Those workers are still with SACCAWU. We have not received a single resignation form from them. The only place where they have majority members is in the Price and Pride stores in Johannesburg and about 20 workers in the Border region." Kganare says SACCAWU is not worried by this clerical union. We have examples of unions like FEDCRAW that was formed when Sales House workers broke away from CCAWUSA, the forerunner of SACCAWU. But after some years those workers have come back to the union.

Kganare believes that Tsotetsi and his group are a "dishonest bunch. For example, Thibedi never complained of corruption while he was employed by SACCAWU. But as soon as he



**Papi Kganare**

resigned, he started trumpeting the corruption tune. The only problem they are causing us is the current court case they have instituted to have SACCAWU dissolved," says Kganare.

And where do they get the money to run their union which has five organisers and an administrator? Tsotetsi is not saying, he claims

that they still owe rent for the month of January for their spacious office in Jeppe Street. Kganare says he is convinced there is an organisation behind the breakaway union. "Otherwise how can Tsotetsi and his group afford to pay legal fees for the case to dissolve SACCAWU?"

Although Tsotetsi denies that there are political undertones to the formation of his union, political tensions within the Wits region have dogged the union since its adoption of the Freedom Charter in the 80s. The acrimony within SACCAWU that followed this decision saw the union split down the middle, so much so that at one COSATU congress there were two SACCAWU delegations, as was the case in all COSATU structures. It appears as though the anti-Freedom Charter grouping, for lack of a better description, now feels that they have no prospect of gaining political control of SACCAWU, thereby resorting to the formation of a new union.

Other unions that were formed by splinter groups from SACCAWU have not made much headway in eroding the union's membership where it matters most. Major chainstores and supermarkets are still organised under SACCAWU and show loyalty to the current leadership.

There is an element of truth in what Kganare says: "The question of lack of service is not something that Tsotetsi and his group can solve. Most unions have problems of this nature, but they cannot be solved by forming splinter unions." Kganare believes that workers who leave SACCAWU to join Tsotetsi will see through them and will come back to their union.

Forming a union is an easy thing to do, but ensuring its growth and survival takes a lot of hard work and honesty in dealing with workers, the bosses and other interest groups in the field. It is early days yet to pass judgement on whether the new union will stand up to this challenge. But the question is whether any substantial numbers of SACCAWU members will want to break away from an established union and join an unknown entity with an uncertain future. ☆