

The South African Labour Bulletin's **Survey of its trade union readership**

Early in 1994 the SALB carried out its first ever readership survey amongst its key readership - trade unionists. The survey sought to investigate the Bulletin's distribution, what its readers like and what they don't like about it, what other journals they were reading, and their ideas for improvement in contents, layout, language, editorial policy and advertising.

Scope:

The survey interviewed a representative cross section of readers. 19% were general secretaries, 15% other senior union officials, 23% union education officers, 17% midrank officials/organisers, and 25% shopstewards. 17 unions or federations were surveyed, including 13 from the COSATU stable.

Distribution of/access to the Bulletin

The survey found that the bulk distribution system of the Bulletin via the unions was not working well as far as shopstewards were concerned. Although union officials obtained their copies quite regularly, shopstewards complained about great difficulty in obtaining copies of the Bulletin. As one shop steward (and Branch Chairperson) complained: "The organiser always steals the Branch copy!"

It became clear that the current distribution system is far too haphazard and will have to be corrected without delay.

Readers' Rating of the Bulletin

In general, readers rated the Bulletin very favourably. Particular kinds of article were favourites with different kinds of audience: for example, higher ranking union officials preferred articles covering strategic and socio-political debates. Lower down the ranks the preference was for articles with a

more practical, historical or factual content. But all readers were agreed on the broad range of articles appearing in the Bulletin, thus appealing to different tastes and needs.

On the issue of whether the Bulletin should or should not cover the views of business (company directors/personnel managers etc) responses were mixed. At a senior level the two main views were:

- 1) "keep the SALB a strictly labour journal"
- 2) "bring business into the debates, we must engage."

Lower down the ranks the views expressed were

- 1) "keep business out - it's our journal"
- 2) "know your enemy! Let's hear what they have to say!"

Suggestions for future inclusion

Senior officials wanted theoretical and policy input, and constructive criticism of the labour movement.

Mid-ranks officials sought mainly information servicing (eg. news of what is going on in the unions).

Shopstewards asked for news, topics and research on workplace issues, and a forum for exchange of views.

Education officers reinforced the needs expressed by the middle and lower union levels.

Layout, Readability

Nearly all readers approved of the current layout, style and language level used in the Bulletin, although various useful suggestions were made to improve these areas.

Editorial Policy

The SALB policy of being "pro labour but independent" met with criticism from non-COSATU respondents who felt the Bulletin



Knowledge is power...

Can they get hold of the knowledge that gives the power?

was too pro-COSATU. Some major COSATU affiliates felt that the SALB could be more critical of COSATU, in a constructive way. The consensus was for the Bulletin to remain independent and not develop into the voice of a post-election labour/business/ government consensus. However the preference was for the Bulletin to seek more diversity of views and become more freely critical inside and outside the house of labour.

Advertising

There was no objection to use of advertising, especially as a cost-cutter, subject to the need to not allow ads to overwhelm content, and subject to sensitivity to labour movement values (no sexist, racist, anti-health ads). An awareness of the strategic power of advertising was seen as necessary, expressed most amusingly by the quip: "When Coke workers are on strike, advertise Pepsi."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The survey concluded that the Bulletin is held in very high regard in the labour movement, but serious attention must be given to the question of distribution, since current reach among the unions is far less than meets the apparent demand.

The editorial staff is currently introducing some of the suggested improvements made by readers into the 1994 editions, but the main concern will have to be how to distribute the Bulletin more effectively. A pilot distribution-improving plan, with the help of the unions, is currently under way. If successful the plan can be extended to other unions. The estimation is that the readership amongst unions can be trebled if this problem can be solved.

Bearing in mind the recent and sudden closure of WIP for financial reasons, the SALB will be approaching unions for assistance to solve the distribution problems as a matter of urgency. ☆