

# New union aims to take on the small bosses

The Combined Small Factory Workers Union (CSFWU), has been establishing a presence in small factories and workshops in the light industrial corridor which stretches from Kew through Kramerville to Midrand in Johannesburg. We reproduce below an interview presented to SALB by a CSFWU official.

**Question:** *The policy of one union one industry is a cornerstone of progressive union policy. CSFWU organises across a range of industries, so could this not be seen as a weakening of the union movement?*

**Answer:** CSFWU is not really a general union, since it has a specific function, which is to organise small factories. This is a peculiarity that perhaps needs some explanation. The union finds its roots in an advice centre - the Alexandra Workers Advice Association (AWAA) - which was initiated by a resident's group in 1986. There are many such centres, as you know - Black Sash, Industrial Aid

Society, offices affiliated to the Advice Centres Association, most of them relying on the professional expertise of the Legal Resources Centre. And they all have more or less the same format and objectives - to help people who don't know how to find their way in the legal or bureaucratic maze.

In AWAA, we restricted ourselves at the outset to those problems that arise where the odds are most uneven, individuals from the working class being confronted by the State or by capital. (Where the matter is between individuals at loggerheads, we refer them to other advice centres.) In practice this has meant that most of our cases have been work-related.

**Question:** *Did you abandon the advice office, in developing the union, or what is the relation between the two?*

**Answer:** The Advice Association is still there, and still helps individuals outside of the factory context - domestic workers, the unemployed, people with housing problems, etc., but as time went by AWAA came under a lot of pressure from members to transform the Advice Association into a different kind of organisation, capable of incorporating those situations where organised resistance was possible. Moreover, we were gradually becoming aware of the limitations and faults of the advice centre approach.

**Question:** *Could you pinpoint these?*

**Answer:** There are two essential faults, I think. Bear in mind that the effect of racial legislation in this country is not simply to deprive one individual of his pension cheque, another of notice pay; it is to strip people of initiative and motivation. Workers are brought into conditions of anxiety and dependence so that their labour may be exploited. As advisers we no more than invoke the laughable degree of redress available in law - we fill out WCA forms, demand notice pay, threaten employers with court action, all of which is hardly a satisfactory response to the problems generated by systematic oppression.

Besides, the person seeking relief remains inactive, a victim, a complainant, while the adviser does things for him, knows the law, knows the ropes. This adviser is then in the position of a bureaucrat, whether you like it or not, and there is a very real tendency to become high-handed.

The worker's dependence, the adviser's power, actually reproduce the relations of domination which caused the problem in the first place. It is those relations themselves, not their symptoms or effects, that must be attacked. Advice Centres can expand into larger premises, hire more officers, etc., but cannot grow in the more profound sense of development in popular, mass organisation.

**Question:** *So you felt a need to break out of the mould of an advice centre. But was it always clear what other direction to take?*

**Answer:** Well, as I said, most of our cases were industrial problems - unfair dismissals, low wages, bad treatment, thus the form of a union seemed the appropriate one. We were also beginning to perceive that we needed to intervene in work problems more directly, be getting right inside factories, to apply pressure on management. We also wanted to be involved parties to Industrial Council conciliation meetings, and within the Industrial Court.

**Question:** *And so you established a union?*

**Answer:** We first considered the possibility of attaching the advice of-  
fice to a shopsteward local ... but  
that would have been a top-down af-  
fair, with no chance of releasing the  
organising energies of workers in  
general. We feared it would be a bit  
amateurish. Eventually we did the  
most direct and clear thing possible,  
and formed the union. At present  
the union has 850 paid-up members.  
Its structure is made up of a govern-  
ing body consisting of twelve  
workers, six elected at the AGM,  
and the other six by shopstewards.  
From the governing body, the struc-  
ture goes into two directions. The  
one direction is of an executive com-  
mittee, and the other is a  
shopsteward council. Staff and  
general secretary are appointed by  
the governing body.

**Question:** *With hindsight do you think the move was a correct one?*

**Answer:** Emphatically yes.  
CSFWU is not a year old and, even  
while restricting itself because of se-  
verely limited resources, it has  
gained a foothold in nearly fifty  
workplaces - light engineering  
plants, motor workshops, paint and  
chemical manufacturers, construc-  
tion, catering, distributive and meat  
trades, as well as workers employed  
either privately or institutionally as  
domestic and general workers; new

workers (some of whom earn as  
little as R40 per week) are coming  
to the office daily to find out about  
the union. Small factories where em-  
ployees previously had no chance or  
hope whatever of union member-  
ship are now active in a full union  
organisation.

**Question:** *I assume there are problems inherent in the small size of the factories you organise?*

**Answer:** Indeed. Not to forget  
that there are advantages too. But  
to begin with the former. The main  
administrative problem is precisely  
that which makes large unions reluc-  
tant to take them on; union officials  
have a great deal of work to do at  
each factory, yet the gain in mem-  
bership is very small.

The difficulties faced by these wor-  
kers derives from the 'relations in  
production'.(1) You must realise  
that these really are *small* firms we  
are speaking of. There are some in  
the union with as few as five wor-  
kers. The largest single factory  
organised has only 40 workers. In  
such cases ownership and manage-  
ment is usually vested in the same  
person, whose rule over his em-  
ployees is direct and immediate. It  
differs only in being either paternal-  
istic, or despotic. In both cases the  
fury generated within the owner  
when the union appears on the  
scene (a snake in his paradise) is  
quite alarming. It is a personal crisis  
for him. He takes the view that the

workers were his 'family'; alternatively, he considers that he has a right to their labour and they are his vassals. Now suddenly they are not 'his' at all. They say they belong to the union. As children, they have betrayed him; as slaves, they have revolted. Either way they are in for a lot of shit. Being few in number, employees have to face their bosses' rage pretty directly. And it is not only his rage that gives workers problems to solve - he is capable of very subtle manoeuvres to try to restore the old relations.

The boss is furthermore likely to be ignorant, having never felt the need to acquaint himself with the industrial laws applicable to his business. This combination of indignation, rage, unfairness, ignorance and cunning gives workers and organisers a lot of work to do before they can achieve fairly reasonable work conditions.

A recent struggle illustrates this and the ultimate powerlessness of workers in the small industry situation. At C, a workshop servicing industrial machines, workers have been victimised for some time while management has resisted the fact of the union and refused to recognise it. When one day the battle came to a head, with workers walking out of a meeting called by management at which the boss was discussing the union but refusing workers the right to a union representative, management went completely wild at this loss of control over their employees.

Threats to close down the workshop were advanced, the staff was immediately put onto short time, and within the next two days three workers were dismissed, and subsequently another two were "re-trenched". A court application in this respect has been filed, but one can wait up to six months or longer for the case to be heard.

We recently won a similar case in the Industrial Court - employees who had been dismissed for union activity were reinstated retrospectively. The employer however refused to comply with the order (which was given, incidentally, six months after workers had lost their jobs and been without income) and the matter had to be handed over to lawyers, the Johannesburg Magistrates Court and the police. Nine months later, workers still have no results.

**Question:** *You mentioned that advantages could also derive from the small size of the factories.*

**Answer:** Yes, seen from another angle, the small size of workplaces gives the union a possible advantage. Relations between management and workers is so immediate, the boss is actually vulnerable here. He would obviously prefer to be able to gain his surplus without undue unpleasantness. Thus he makes workers feel that he is doing them a favour by employing them! When it happens

therefore, that workers explicitly reject this falsehood, and when they begin to exert sustainable demands, undermining his arbitrary rule, a measure of discomfort is apparent within the firm, which in some cases leads to harshness and dismissals, but might also contrarily lead to great improvements, in the employer's effort to re-establish overall authority and patronage. Not infrequently it pays us to rely on this, rather than on the limited benefits of Industrial Court awards. At B, for example, a small distributive concern, management was highly indignant at the fact of his employees joining a union, and in rivalry put up his wages by 70%. Management at L, a light manufacturing business, keep increasing wages in the hope that workers will abandon the union, whose presence embarrasses them. Wages in this factory are probably some of the highest in the whole area, reaching R4-75 per hour.

The smallness of the factories, and the variety of industries participating in the union, together generate a lot of work for union officials. On the other hand, these features also offer rewards, in that organisers are exposed to many different kinds of tasks.

**Question:** *Are workers totally reliant, then, on the specific personality and response pattern of their particular employer? Surely industrial law,*

*the unfair labour practice, etc., afford a measure of protection against wildly unreasonable behaviour?*

**Answer:** The concept of fairness is an interesting one. In sport, fairness is a necessary condition. Much trouble is taken to ensure that neither side has an *unfair advantage*. Most people would be quick to pronounce a race between two people, where the one has a head start of 200m, unfair. There has to be some measure of equality between participants.

Relations between workers and management are simply unequal in that management controls production. Management is in control, and concepts of fairness as recognised in law are in fact built on a foundation of entrenched and inherent inequality. Time and time again workers realise through struggle that the real struggle is for control of production. Anything less than this can only achieve the economic functioning of a workers' organisation - trade union as mediator, as adm

**Question:** *What do workers achieve through the union, then? Or, to put the question more broadly, does the presence of the union not equalise things between employers and workers?*

**Answer:** No. You ask what workers achieve, so let us put it this

way. It is often the very smallness, the inconspicuousness of firms of this scale that enables them to exploit. Take for example a fast food outlet, really just a small cafe, run by a man and his wife, employing six people. Wages are R50 per week, where the minimum stipulates R62. The staff work 55 hours per week, which is 10 hours over the limit (overtime therefore, but not even paid at normal rates!). In the course of a year, the saving for the owner, in blatant underpayment, comes to over R10 000. That is, R10 000 robbed from the legal entitlement of a mere six workers. Multiply that figure for a factory of sixty workers, and you get some idea of the gain small-plant capitalists can extract. We are speaking of a *marginal* gain, over and above the far larger amounts taken in the form of profit. Remember too that even the minimum we are referring to is abysmally low. R248 per month in Johannesburg is outrageous exploitation in return for hard, exhausting work.

Workers can make some wage gains in challenging this super-exploitation. But employers are constantly telling workers and union organisers "we can get anyone off the street for R40 or less a week" - and we know they speak the truth. This puts power almost absolutely into the hands of employers. Unions can and do challenge this power; but a union can never establish *equality* between workers and bosses. The

bosses are dominant, and we must not shirk seeing it and stating it.

**Question:** *But there are processes of conciliation, there is protection by the Industrial Court, and you do, do you not, make use of these institutions? They provide a shield.*

**Answer:** In a way, of course. But I wonder to what extent this shield also conceals from us real domination. It is that, after all, that provides the scope for exploitation. The union does not offer total protection by any means. As I said earlier we have had dismissals following our announcement of the union presence, and not been able to get back the jobs.

As for Industrial Councils, we have come to expect most council officials to take the side of employers quite unashamedly. In many cases action taken by employers to dismiss or retrench, which leads to Industrial Court hearings favouring the union, have been the direct result of advice given to employers by councils or even by the Department of Manpower.

**Question:** *So what is the advantage of union organisation?*

**Answer:** Unions are the proper place for *preparing* workers to be in control of production. We speak here not of ownership, which is less important, but of real control. Only then will relations in factories be

anything other than domination of capital over labour. We should intervene in the space of production, but not with illusions.

**Question:** *To move onto internal relations. How do union members relate to the union and to one another?*

**Answer:** Yes, that aspect is even more important in our view, than all the technical matters arising from the actual job of negotiating with capital.

The feeling workers had when they pressed AWAA to alter the advice office in this direction was really sound. Relations between the organisers/officials of the union, and workers, have really changed. It is now in general forum that problems are presented, analysed, and debated. We have general meetings every week, and it is to these meetings that workers bring their problems. There is an interchange of skills and a flow of opinions at these meetings that validates each and every person and enables them to contribute fully. The chair is taken by a different member at each meeting, so that the skills of handling meetings become common property. It is really at these meetings that mandates are given, and within a week report-backs are expected. And it is important to note that members do not feel themselves to be clients, but members in a very full and active sense. It is they, by and large, who undertake

the organising of new factories, who advise and encourage one another. The problem that was formerly presented by a victim to an expert for solution, is transformed. It is now an aspect of class struggle, dealt with by organised workers and organisers, on terms of parity and comradeship. The situation does not (as did the advice office mode) reproduce relations of paternalism. Other unions also have resolved, in this way precisely, that major problem of the advice office, wage commission, etc., - the liberal aspect.

**Question:** *Let us agree that you gain in the transition from an advice centre to a union; is it not a further logical gain to develop from a union such as CSFWU to an industrial form of union organisation?*

**Answer:** You have to keep pace with workers themselves, from whom the energy and initiative must come if an organisation is to remain healthy. Large unions simply will not take on small factories, or if they say they do, in practice they neglect them, do not keep faith with them. Many of our members have come to us after a rejection or a referral from a large union, or because of a bad experience with organisers from another union. This is easily understood: unions' resources, especially in manpower, are over-stretched. They just cannot afford the time needed for the limited gains of very small workforce num-

## ***SMALL FACTORIES***

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bers. And for CSFWU to ignore this reality, and allow members' energy to become nullified, instead of concentrated and stimulated as it is now, would be very foolish.

Of course we see the advantage of industrial unions, and the correctness of this stance. Wherever possible, we advise workers to seek affiliation to the larger unions. But

AWAA and the CSFWU draw workers each day from the light industrial area from Kew through to Midrand, which relies on the labour pools of Alex and Tembisa. In this situation, to follow the principle of industrial unions blindly would render us inactive; it would be to abdicate the task of thorough worker organisation.

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