

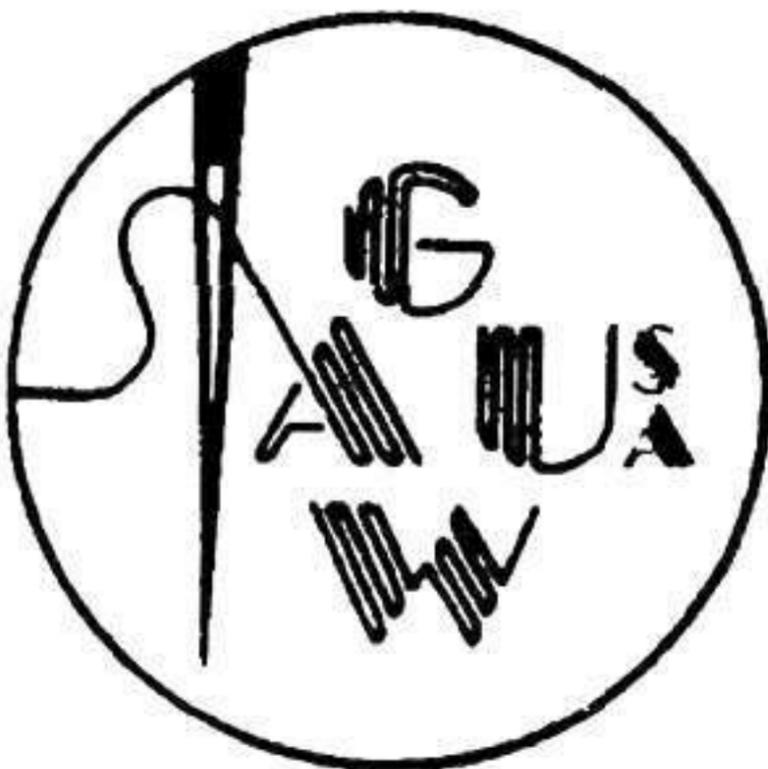
# Garment and textile giant

The two major unions operating in the garment and textile industries will merge in mid-September this year and bringing together a total of 175,000 workers. They are COSATU's Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union (ACTWUSA) and the independent Garment and Allied Workers' Union (GAWU). LABOUR BULLETIN correspondent reports.

The new union will be the third biggest in COSATU, after NUM and NUMSA. ACTWUSA will bring with it 71,000 members, most of them from Natal and Transvaal. Workers from the two provinces together make up 50,000 of ACTWUSA members. Most of ACTWUSA's Natal membership is concentrated in the textile in-

dustry, while a significant proportion in the Transvaal is employed in clothing factories. GAWU, by comparison has a token membership of only 1,000 in the Transvaal and OFS.

The majority of GAWU's 98,000 members are concentrated in the clothing industries of the Western Cape, where it represents 52,000 workers,



## **UNIONS AND DISPUTES**

and Natal, where it has 46,000 members. Another important characteristic of its membership is that most are coloured and Indian women workers.

The new union's biggest region will be Natal where it will have a total of 76,000 members. From COSATU's point of view, the new union will be its biggest affiliate in both Natal and the Western Cape. This will have an important bearing on the effectiveness of the federation's national campaigns.

A lot still has to be done before these statistics become meaningful. But much has already been achieved since the initial meeting in December last year. The unions have reached agreement on a number of issues. Though not the most important issues, they have been significant enough to give both unions the confidence to commit themselves to unity in just over two months from now.

### **No-poaching agreement**

One of the most positive agreements is the undertaking by both unions not to organise in factories where the other union exists. Poaching of membership by one union from the other has been the source of great hostility between them. One of the factors which made the unity talks necessary was the clashes between the GAWU and ACTWUSA membership in factories where both unions have a presence.

The unions have agreed that at two factories, Man About Town and Kingsgate, arrangements would be

made for joint representation. At the same time, ACTWUSA agreed to withdraw its application for membership of the Natal Clothing Industrial Council, on which GAWU is already represented.

As a demonstration of their commitment to the merger, the unions exchanged leaders. GAWU's Special National Congress was addressed by ACTWUSA's first vice president. In exchange, GAWU sent its treasurer to address the ACTWUSA Special National Congress. Another factor which has generated a sense of optimism is that all the merger committee meetings between ACTWUSA and GAWU have been conducted in a "comradely and constructive manner".

But there are differences, and important ones. Much still has to be done to allay the suspicions that exist among members, given the varying political traditions the two unions come from. In fact this is one of the reasons for GAWU seeking a postponement of the inaugural congress from July 1 to September.

In motivating a postponement, GAWU pointed out that unless there was a greater participation in debate and discussion of the merger at grass-roots level serious division could be created. It also pointed out that interaction between GAWU and ACTWUSA had been limited to leadership and merger committees. GAWU recommended that a programme to increase interaction of membership at all levels should be drawn up. It will be important to translate this programme into reality on the factory floor if the two



*Garment workers at the launch of GAWU in 1987*

*Photo: GAWU*

unions are to forge one identity and "foster a spirit of fraternalism" among their respective members. The history of conflict between the two unions makes this imperative.

### **Political policy differences**

There are also differences on the question of political policy. The Freedom Charter is an important focus of these differences. While neither union has adopted the Charter, there is support for the document within GAWU's ranks. Neither union emerged from their respective SNC's with clear-cut positions on the document. GAWU committed itself to embarking on an intensive education

programme on COSATU's political policy and the Freedom Charter, as well as the ANC's constitutional guidelines.

ACTWUSA on the other hand has decided to initiate debate on the question of a workers' charter. But it clarified that the resolution calling for debate on the workers' charter did not mean opposition to the Freedom Charter. ACTWUSA also points out that the constitutional guidelines call for a charter protecting workers' rights. In ACTWUSA's view, the constitutional guidelines offer more scope for consensus, and therefore a broader basis for unity, than the Freedom Charter.

The question of alliances is also at issue. While ACTWUSA believes that

its leadership should not take up positions in organisations outside the union, GAWU encourages this. But both unions have committed themselves to finding common grounds on these issues. They have also stressed that neither side should make the merger conditional on a resolution of these differences. A resolution will nevertheless have to be found if the new union is to advance the struggles of the garment and textile workers. If anything, these differences guarantee lively debate in the new union, as well as within COSATU.

What must emerge from these debates and from common struggle in a single garment and textile union, is a new culture and a single identity. This will not be easy. The new union will be the only COSATU affiliate in which African workers will be in the minority. GAWU will bring with it a large majority of coloured and Indian workers, while ACTWUSA membership is mostly African.

### **New militancy among coloured and Indian workers**

It would be incorrect to categorise the GAWU membership as conservative because of its dormant past. Perceptions of COSATU have changed radically in the last year among GAWU membership. There is a clear and positive identification with COSATU policy and this has become more apparent with every mass rally. Placards and union songs point to the development of a new and militant consciousness. The workers militancy

was developed in the living wage strikes and in the protests against the new labour law (LRA) last year. GAWU members launched wildcat strikes and protest against the LRA, while COSATU itself was inactive in the Western Cape.

GAWU's living wage campaign was also accompanied by militant action, the most significant of which was the Rex Trueform strike, where 2,000 downed tools for three weeks. This was the first major strike in the clothing industry in the Western Cape, and it generated massive support from other garment workers. There were wildcat strikes at a number of other factories in support of the living wage campaign. In fact, the increases negotiated at industrial council were the biggest ever won by the union in the Western Cape where the bulk of the GAWU membership is concentrated.

A militant shop steward leadership in the union also began to emerge. During the Build-a-Bridge campaign shopstewards won a promise from the city council that it would build a footbridge over a busy road. Militant shopstewards also met with S.A. Transport Services (SATS) to discuss grievances over changing train schedules that made them late for work. Shopstewards took the lead in these campaigns.

In an unprecedented show of organised worker strength, GAWU managed to convene a living wage rally of more than 6,000 members. This was by far the biggest gathering of workers in the Western Cape in recent labour history. All this shows that



**ACTWUSA members in a demonstration against the new LRA**

*Photo: Chris Ledochowski/Afrapix*

GAWU has been able to mobilise the latent militancy of its constituency more effectively than most would have expected, given its conservative past.

In Natal too GAWU has succeeded in mobilizing Indian women workers into militant struggles. The most surprising indication of this was the massive support for last year's 3-day stayaway in June.

ACTWUSA also has conservative traditions, drawn mainly from TWIU and GWIU which were former TUCSA affiliates. The third union which merged into ACTWUSA was NUTW, a militant former FOSATU affiliate whose main base was among textile workers in Natal. NUTW was

one of the COSATU affiliates which most consistently opposed alliances with community organisations.

### **Different traditions and cultures**

The merger will therefore bring together various degrees of militancy, different political traditions and different cultures and this presents enormous challenges. It could also have positive implications. GAWU, for example, which is going through the wildcat strike phase, could draw on the important tactical lessons that the NUTW membership has learnt in the last ten years of factory floor struggles.

GAWU and ACTWUSA have agreed that the new union will seek affiliation to COSATU. This will introduce a new tradition into the federation - namely the tradition of closed shops. GAWU has closed shop agreements with the industrial councils in the Western and Eastern Cape as well as Natal. These prevent any other union from organising in the clothing factories. Closed shop are unprecedented in the history of the progressive labour movement. The existence of the closed shop in one of its biggest affiliates will certainly initiate a debate in COSATU around this issue.

COSATU unions have always operated on the basis of the principle of majoritarianism and a 50% plus one representation which ensured that no minority union would be given recognition. This was in line with democratic principles, the cornerstone of COSATU policy. But the amended labour law makes it an unfair labour practice *not* to recognise minority unions.

Closed shops were first raised in COSATU as a possible strategy to fight minority unions promoted by the LRA. GAWU's entry into COSATU will therefore contribute to the debate on how the federation should resist minority "fish and chips" unionism.

### **New base for COSATU in Western Cape**

At another level, GAWU's entry into the federation has important implications for COSATU's presence in

the Western Cape. One of the major weaknesses in the federations' national network has been the absence in the Western Cape of structures that were comparable to those in the Transvaal, Eastern Cape and Natal. The type of unionism that emerged in the Western Cape failed to mobilise the majority of workers in the area, namely coloured workers, into action.

By comparison, GAWU has been able to mobilise this sector of workers into action around the same issues that are of concern in COSATU. The garment industry is the biggest in the Cape. The merger will root COSATU for the first time deeply in the communities of the coloured majority. In Natal too, the new union will bring a huge constituency of Indian workers into COSATU.

There are other plus factors for the organisation in the garment, textile and leather industry. The potential membership of 175,000 will cover almost all major factories and companies in every region in the country. This will place workers in the strongest position ever to consolidate national structures and demand a national industrial council for both the garment and textile sectors.

This has already become the focus of the living wage campaign in both GAWU and ACTWUSA. While GAWU has identified the need for a single national industrial council, in the garment sector, ACTWUSA has also moved to secure national recognition at major companies in the textile sector, among them Barlow Rand's Romatex. ☆