

THE NATIONAL GENERAL WORKERS UNION

The SALB interviewed Donsie Khumalo, General Secretary of the National General Workers Union in Pretoria, 7th March 1984 on the growth of his union over the last twelve months.

SALB: How did you get involved in trade union activity?

Khumalo: As a production worker at Sigma I helped persuade workers to join the National Union of Motor Assembly and Rubber Workers of South Africa (NUMARWOSA). During the big strike I was elected to the Committee of Twenty in the factory and was among the 450 "undesirables" discharged by the Company. I was not happy with the union's line during the strike and helped start a local branch of the Motor Assemblies and Components Workers Union of South Africa (MACWUSA) and the General Workers Union of South Africa (GWUSA). We never regained ground in Sigma.

SALB: How did the NGWU come to be established?

Khumalo: With MACWUSA everything had to be sanctioned by head office in Port Elizabeth. At a general meeting held on 19 March 1983 workers decided to break away and control their own affairs.

SALB: Why was it decided to adopt a strategy of general unionism? What are the advantages?

Khumalo: Workers wanted general unionism. We recognise the importance of industrial unions especially when they have a national presence and therefore greater bargaining power. But at this stage - while industrial unions are turning new members away - general unions are very attractive to workers. At this time general unions play an important role in implanting trade union concepts.

At a future stage we may need to demarcate on industrial lines.

SALB: Has this strategy of general unionism led to any rivalry with other unions?

Khumalo: We have no conflict with other unions - even with MACWUSA. There was some rivalry from the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA) but we still co-operated during the recent strikes. We have close ties with the South African Allied Workers Union (SAAWU). We do not take each other's members. I would like closer ties with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) and the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA).

SALB: Can you give us some details about the NGWU: where it operates, how many members, the number of plants organised, what sectors are involved, what kind of workers are joining?

Khumalo: The union started with 4000 signed up members. Today there are 6000. Of these 1100 work for Pick 'n Pay in 10 different places. We now have stop-orders for these workers. The rest are organised in 112 different firms mostly in retail and services but also including metal and other industries. The union operates in Pretoria, Witbank and Middelburg. The members are mostly unskilled with a few semi-skilled in the metal industry. There is a large number of women members. Nearly all the members are Sotho speakers and the majority are migrants or commuters from Bophuthatswana on fixed term contracts. There are some hostel dwellers. Few of our members are from Mamelodi and Atteridgeville.

SALB: We would like to know how the union works. How do you organise in the factory and what are the union structures beyond the individual plant?

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Khumalo: Originally I was the only organiser. We now have five. All come from the shopfloor. We start with a few workers we know in a factory, or who come to the office, and get them to organise inside the firm. The target is 100%. We arrange meetings in Pretoria to explain to workers that they are part of a union not just one factory. As soon as we have 50% membership we have elections of all members for shop stewards to form a negotiating committee. This committee takes up grievances and negotiates with management. Except in Pick 'n Pay the shop stewards collect members' subscriptions but these fluctuate from month to month. This is our only source of finance.

Outside the factory we have a general meeting of the membership every month in Pretoria. Workers discuss common problems. These are exciting occasions. Workers see themselves as part of a bigger union, that they are all equally exploited. The general meeting mandates union officials. Attendance fluctuates.

There is also an executive committee which sits between general meetings. This consists of six workers elected by the general meeting plus the officials. But the officials do not vote. Eventually we plan to set up shop stewards committees but this has not started yet.

SALB: What successes has the union had so far?

KHUMALO: We have taken up a number of dismissals and secured reinstatement. We have used Section 43 of the Industrial Conciliation Act to achieve this. Where there have been retrenchments we have secured retrenchment pay and a promise to re-engage. It is too early to point to success on the wages front. The industrial councils make this difficult.

SALB: Turning to wider issues, what is your view of the recent trade union unity talks?

KHUMALO: There were good and bad elements in these

talks. It is too sensitive to comment. The NGWU favours a strong federation especially in the face of current attacks and the general economic climate.

SALB: At an early stage of the unity discussions you walked out with MACWUSA refusing to talk to unions which had registered or sat on industrial councils. Have your views changed on this?

KHUMALO: We have rid ourselves of this dogmatic approach. The keynote is flexibility. We see the dangers of industrial councils but we are not in a position to force this on others. We see this as a tactic not a principle.

We do not deviate from our objection to registration for ourselves. Registration can be used to rule out political involvement.

SALB: On that point, what role do you see for the trade unions in wider struggles?

KHUMALO: The working class should have its own political organisation to articulate its political aspirations. The United Democratic Front (UDF) is the appropriate place for this to happen.

SALB: How will specifically working class interests be promoted within the wider UDF alliance?

KHUMALO: The working class must take the leading role through the organised presence of the trade unions. The voting system must be changed to reflect the importance of trade unions. Also union members are taking up their role in the local UDF through community organisations. The UDF is a multi-class alliance. Other organisations should play a supporting role to the working class which is leading the liberation struggle. But it remains important to ally with other classes. If the regime succeeds in co-opting the black middle class this will weaken the working class and increase repression.

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SALB: Some unions have experienced internal divisions over this question of affiliation to the UDF. Others have not affiliated because their members have differing political opinions, for example they may support the National Forum Committee. Would you comment on this.

KHUMALO: Leadership has an important role to play on these questions of philosophy. If the leaders are split then the union will be divided. Black consciousness is not strongly based in the working class. The majority of members of the NGWU favour a non-racial democratic society. The union's constitution includes the principle of non-racialism which has been explained to workers. We cannot fight a racial system from a racial platform.