



Durban municipal workers

Black worker, brown burden

municipal workers and the environment

Municipal workers deal with environmental issues every day – blocked sewage, dead dogs, rubbish disposal. They and their unions could be at the forefront of environmental struggles – linking the workplace, the community and nature, argues DAVID McDONALD*.

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Linking health and safety in the workplace to environmental concerns is a concept that has slowly taken root in South African unions over the past five years. Incidents like the one at Thor Chemicals bring into sharp focus just how much environmentalists and unions have in common.

But what exactly does this mean in practice? What should unions do to get into the environmental debate? How interested are workers themselves?

This article looks at one union in particular – the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) – and offers some concrete ideas based on interviews with 72 labourers. Unions obviously differ across sectors and across regions, but the data from this research should contribute to a better understanding of the environmental concerns and ideas of workers in general.

Defining the environment

I will not go into a detailed discussion here about the need for an expanded definition of “the environment”, enough has been written on this already. Let me simply say that the environment is not limited to *nature*. The living space and working space of *people* are just as much a part of our environment as Kruger Park or Table Mountain. I would however like to introduce some terminology that helps to conceptualise a widening of the definition of ecology: *green* and *brown*.

Green is used here to refer to conventional notions of the environment: conserving wildlife; saving trees; protecting the ozone layer. These are very important issues, but not necessarily priorities for many people. *Brown* is a better description of the environmental issues that affect the majority of South Africans – more immediate and life threatening concerns like blocked sewage pipes, smoky factory floors, and lack of open spaces.

The most critical environmental concerns in this country are obviously the brown ones. People must have a safe and healthy place to live and work. But what makes brown concerns that much more significant is the way they impact on green issues. Having millions of people without toilets contaminates rivers and

kills marine life. Poor safety standards in a factory can cause toxic materials to leak, affecting workers as well as other people, plants, and animals. Far from being separate, green and brown environmental issues are closely linked to one another.

Tackling brown environmental issues (and the poverty and oppression that are their root cause) generally means an improvement in green ecology as well. Workers can play an important role in this link. By demanding better safety standards in the workplace, they can put pressure on managers for less toxic raw materials, better disposal techniques, cleaner technology, etc. This helps improve the workers’ environment, and the environment around them. As Alec Erwin and Rod Crompton (1991) put it: “Trade union struggles for health and safety in the workplace constitute the first line of defence for an embattled environment.”

SAMWU’s unique position

Municipal workers too can play a part in this “first line of defence”. A number of hazardous materials used by municipalities are dangerous to both the workers and the environment at large, and workers can insist that safer alternatives are used. One example is the toxic sprays used to control weeds along sidewalks and verges.

For the most part, though, municipal workers are at the receiving end rather than the producing end of waste. Their raw materials are what comes down the pipes, and there is little they can do about it. But, rather than limiting the environmental role that municipal workers can play, this position at ‘the end of the pipes’ makes them much more important.

Municipal workers handle effluence from industry, contaminated food from restaurants, dead dogs on the streets, residential and commercial refuse, and clogged sewage drains. They even plant trees and clear alien vegetation. These workers are at the hub of a gigantic environmental wheel, and have a much broader environmental vantage point than other unions.

SAMWU could use this unique vantage point in at least two important ways. First, it



Polluted lives, polluted nature: Alexandra scenic view

could link up with other unions (for example, chemical workers) to jointly protest against hazardous substances that affect workers at both ends of the pipe. Second, municipal workers could act as environmental watchdogs of a sort – reporting any major problems that they come across in their work. This would help to forge alliances with a broad spectrum of environmental groups as well as the communities that they serve.

SAMWU and its members are well situated to make an important contribution to the environmental debate. They are large enough and well enough organised to make sure their opinions on environmental policy are heard. They also have the capacity to back their convictions up with protest or strike action. As one worker told me: “We can toyi-toyi if there is air pollution.”

Interview with workers

None of this can be dictated by academia. The union and the workers themselves have to be willing to put in the time and energy it will take to develop environmental policy positions.

The following is a brief summary of interviews over the past ten months with 72 labourers from three municipalities in the greater Cape Town area. The interviews were designed to hear what workers have to say – how interested they are, and what degree of environmental (both green and brown) knowledge the workers may already have.

Workers were selected at random, interviewed at their place of work, and in their own language. Forty-eight were coloured workers, twenty-three were African. There was only one white labourer. Ninety-five percent of the workers were male. Unfortunately, there were not enough women in the three municipalities to say anything about gender. All workers were from the Parks & Forests, Drainage and Sewerage, and Cleansing branches.

So as not to predefine “the environment” for workers, and hence their responses, they were given the chance to express what the environment means to them. This allowed for a wide range of replies and let workers talk about green ecology, brown ecology, or whatever else came to mind (quite a few

spoke about gangs as an environmental problem). Only after this initial discussion were they asked questions specifically related to green and brown issues.

As could be expected, the primary environmental concerns of workers are brown ones. They are concerned about the health and safety of themselves and their families. By and large, workers see "the environment" in very concrete terms – as the place where you live and work, not as some abstract concept of nature.

Eighty-nine percent of workers made reference to brown issues right from the beginning of the interview. Virtually all of them were concerned with unhealthy living conditions, while 75% spoke about unhealthy working conditions.

Far fewer workers spoke about green environmental concerns, with only 22% of the workers bringing up green issues on their own. Nevertheless, when asked specific questions about green ecology, 81% said they were aware of the various problems mentioned and had comments to make on deforestation, water pollution, etc.

There were significant differences along racial lines however. African workers were much more articulate and intense about brown concerns. They were more knowledgeable about the extent to which their work environment impacts on their health, and about how poorly equipped their local authority is to deal with the brown environmental problems in the townships they live and work in. African workers were much more politicised in general, even drawing clear links between apartheid planning and environmental degradation; something that very few coloured workers did.

On the other hand, coloured workers were much more aware of green issues than their African counterparts. In fact, the interview structure had to be altered after some initial pilot tests. We had not expected workers to be raising concerns like saving the whales or protecting sand dunes, but coloured workers were. African workers did not demonstrate the same degree or scope of interest in green ecology.

Environmental workshops

The municipal workers interviewed for this research were very keen to learn more about environmental issues – particularly as they relate to health and safety. It is important, however, to use appropriate educational programmes, and this will take some time to develop.

The following points outline possible themes for environmental education for municipal workers, and how it could be funded.

Reaching the workers

It is important that as many workers as possible are aware of the green/brown environmental links discussed in the attached article. There is no point in having a few really keyed-up people developing policy statements for the union if the membership has no idea what they are talking about. Workers themselves should be aware of their own role in the environment, and how their own health and safety fits into this broader picture. Ideally, this education would entail shopfloor meetings that encourage discussion amongst workers.

Union driven

The education should be union driven. Ecology is a political issue and it is essential that the interests and perspectives of workers are a central theme. There are a number of progressive environmental groups throughout the country whose knowledge should be tapped into, but the union must develop its own internal expertise as well. Only then can a really productive coalition evolve between unions and environmental groups.

Association with community

Workshops should be conducted in the language that workers are most comfortable with. They will learn more and be better able to express themselves. This also gives people in the townships insight into the labour

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component of dealing with brown environmental issues, and helps develop further links between the union and the community. There are a growing number of township-based environmental groups which can provide people to fill these positions (for example, Khayelitsha Environmental Action Group).

Two-way learning

Perhaps the most important element of an education programme is ensuring that workers have an opportunity to voice their own concerns and ideas. Their knowledge of brown issues is an environmental 'expertise' in its own right and should be promoted as such. Education should be an empowering process, not a humiliating one. The task of the workshop facilitator is simply to provide information on green environmental issues, and how brown issues are linked to these.

Funding

Funding the workshops could take one of three routes. The first would be to insist that the municipalities pay for it. After all, they send managers on all sorts of environmentally related courses. This funding would take quite a while to get in place, however, and it may compromise the political tone of the education.

The second option is to use donor funding. The union could set itself a one or two year horizon to use the aid money, after which the educational and policy programmes become the responsibility of the union and are fully integrated into the mainstream structures of the union (health and safety would be a good example, but SAMWU is still in the process of getting this department off the ground).

The third option is a combination of the first two. Use donor funding to establish environmental programmes catering to the needs of the union in the short term, with the objective of having it become a permanent responsibility of the municipality after a couple of years. *R*

The reasons for the differences in green awareness seem fairly clear. Ninety-two percent of the coloured workers said they get their environmental information from the media (local newspapers, television shows), as opposed to just over half of the African workers. Almost 25% of coloured workers made specific reference to a weekly television programme called 50/50, with comments like "I never miss the show". Environmental media reports are almost exclusively green oriented, and are almost entirely in English and Afrikaans. Many of the African workers do not have televisions, and most are only comfortable with Xhosa. Some are illiterate.

Moreover, coloured workers earn up to 100% more than African workers doing the same jobs (in different municipalities). Many of them spoke about going to the beach in their spare time, hiking on Table Mountain, and even going to national parks. African workers spoke about cleaning their yards and going to funerals. They do not have the resources or the access to transportation for recreational activities in "nature", and hence have not had the experience of green ecology in general.

Explaining the different awareness levels of African and coloured workers over brown environmental issues is not so straight forward. Coloured townships certainly are in much better shape than African townships, and coloured workers generally have better protective gear and safety standards, but these differences are only relative. Coloured townships are a disgrace compared to the white areas of Cape Town, and coloured municipal labourers work in appalling conditions. Why coloured workers are not more upset with their living and working environments, and why they are generally not as politicised as their African counterparts remains a complex question, with implications well beyond this subject matter.

I do not want to dwell on these different perceptions, but they do illustrate quite nicely how even a relatively small difference in income and lifestyles can change someone's awareness and interests in ecology.

The more important point to stress here is

that the overwhelming majority of workers interviewed are very interested in "the environment". Conventional wisdom would have it that workers have more important things to be concerned about, but when the definition of ecology is opened up to reflect its true meaning, it is clear that workers have a lot to say on the topic.

Environment education

Regardless of their levels of awareness of green and brown ecology, virtually all the workers interviewed were very enthusiastic about talking to us. For most, it was the first time they had ever discussed how their work relates to other problems they see around them and many openly expressed a desire to learn more about environmental issues in general. Ninety percent of the workers felt that the union has a responsibility to provide its members with environmental education, and to take a position on environmental problems.

If SAMWU is to take up environmental education, it should focus on the relationship between poverty and environmental degradation. This is where awareness levels are lowest. A full three quarters of those interviewed made no connection whatsoever between green and brown issues – even after being given examples of how this link may occur. For those that did make the link, it was often just a comment in passing.

In teaching workers more about green ecology, it must be made clear that green environmental problems are politically and economically related to a wide range of other problems that workers are already familiar with – poor housing, unemployment, insufficient services. Not only will this give them a truer account of South Africa's environmental crisis, it will demonstrate to them just how crucial their role as municipal labourers is. Fully informed workers will be better able to articulate their concerns on ecology to managers, and can contribute to and support their union in related policy matters.

Non-wage gains for municipal workers

Education for workers is not the only area that

SAMWU could act on. SAMWU could use environmental issues to secure non-wage gains for its members. Receiving an acceptable living wage is of central importance to workers, and I am not suggesting that the following ideas act as substitutes, but there is a lot of scope for environmentally related non-wage gains, with important material and psychological benefits for workers.

The most obvious of these non-wage gains is improved health and safety in the workplace. The banning of certain chemical sprays has been mentioned already, but SAMWU should not limit itself to concerns over raw materials. They can call for safe methods as well.

One example of this is refuse collection. Anyone who has been to Cape Town would surely have noticed the profusion of blue dirt bins for litter – there are 30 000 of them in the city. Municipal managers are very pleased with their effort to 'Keep the Cape in Shape', but no one seems to have considered (or cared) how the bins would be emptied. There is no release mechanism on the bottom or sides, so workers have to reach in and pull the trash out by hand – broken glass, rotten fruit, and all. The workers are given gloves, but this gives them terrible rashes in the heat. The city may be greener because of these bins, but the working environment remains dangerous.

A similar story applies to the bucket system. Although the use of buckets is an environmental improvement over people having to use the bush as a toilet, it results in one of the most unhealthy and unpleasant jobs imaginable. If working conditions are unacceptable, then so is the environmental planning behind it.

Developing more worker-friendly ways of providing environmental services will require the involvement of workers. They are the ones who do the actual work. They know where many of the safety problems are and have practical ideas on how best to alleviate or eliminate them.

Involving workers in the design and planning of municipal services could also help with the better provision of services in general. Municipal workers have an intimate knowledge of brown environmental issues.

They know every nook and cranny of the squatter camps and townships – where the sewage problems are, where refuse collection is most needed – and they can contribute to designing the most effective and efficient systems to tackle these problems.

These kinds of basic participatory experiences go beyond health and safety. They are empowering and democratising. It gives workers a chance to apply their brown environmental expertise, while at the same time exposing them to the broader environmental context within which they operate. Collecting dead dogs on the streets will never be a glamorous job, but understanding the broader environmental significance of what one does and being given an opportunity to voice one's opinion can go a long way to giving a worker a sense of pride and responsibility.

Having a workforce that feels it is making an important contribution to the improvement of the environment can lead to significant productivity gains as well. This would seem to be specifically true if workers can apply this energy to their own communities. Workers from the black local authority in particular showed a remarkable desire to do a better job for the community they worked in – if only they could have adequate resources to do what was needed and a top management structure that listened to what they had to say. There was a sense of determination and commitment from these workers that was not evident from those servicing the wealthy white suburbs.

Getting involved in the broader environmental debate

SAMWU should also take the initiative to get involved in the environmental debate on a broader level. As representatives of what is arguably the most important environmental workforce in the country, SAMWU should be in the forefront of debates on ecology – particularly as they relate to the provision of services.

A good place to start would be in the

metropolitan negotiating forums, where SAMWU can use environmental arguments to push for a more equitable and efficient use of municipal resources. It is essential, for example, that someone raise the environmental consequences of having one refuse vehicle for every 4 000 people in white areas while there is only one refuse vehicle for every 75 000 people in a black area. Not only does this imbalance affect the living standards in the townships, it undermines the environmental integrity of the city as a whole. There will never be an effective integrated waste management plan while these sorts of imbalances continue.

With a few notable exceptions, most environmental groups in South Africa, and most municipal bureaucrats for that matter, are very green-oriented when it comes to ecology. Their environmental concerns

revolve more around saving a vleibank or protecting sand dunes. There is an urgent need for an alternative voice that can push the concept of a brown environmental agenda and tie this in to local government restructuring.



Conclusion

Whether it be non-wage gains at work or health and safety issues in the townships, municipal workers and their unions can play an important role in the development of appropriate environmental policies. The workers themselves are keen to learn more about their role in the broader environmental scheme of things, and this bodes well for the future involvement of SAMWU in environmental debates.

I have tried to convey in this article a sense of ecology which goes beyond the strict boundaries that we tend to put on different "issues". Ecology is a political, social, and economic concern. It is about where we work, where we live, and where we play. It is about all the things that South Africans have struggled for over years. A healthy environment is a fundamental aspect of restructuring this shattered country, and municipal workers are truly on the front-line of this environmental rebuilding. *R*