

Khumalo on NGWU

A new general workers' union has been formed in Pretoria. Its general secretary, **DONSIE KHUMALO** broke away from the Motor Assemblers and Component Workers' Union (MACWUSA) and the General Workers' Union of South Africa (GWUSA) to set up the National General Workers' Union. Glenn Moss interviewed Khumalo on the NGWU, and on his controversial involvement in the Athlone trade union unity summit.

The National General Workers' Union, formed after a split in the Pretoria branches of MACWUSA and GWUSA, has come out in support of current unity moves to form a new trade union federation. Indeed, general secretary Donsie Khumalo says that the NGWU already has relationships with a number of Pretoria unions, based on their demarcation policy. 'Where a union has membership in a particular industry, we won't go in there to organise', he explained. NGWU will only recruit currently unorganised workers 'except that where TUCSA is organised, we are definitely going to organise. TUCSA unions are negotiating on the industrial councils, despite the fact that they are unrepresentative. They are not representing the aspirations of the workers'.

Khumalo argues that, while the NGWU 'supports the current efforts towards unity', and 'will join a federation in the future', there is no need to join the feasibility committee looking at unity. At present, the NGWU feels it needs rather to 'consolidate our position as regards membership'.

The break away from MACWUSA/GWUSA was, according to Khumalo, based on a number of disputes between the Port Elizabeth and Pretoria branches. 'The union was not democratically controlled.

We were told from Port Elizabeth what to do. The membership in Pretoria were not happy about that. When I was arrested for inciting a strike, I informed Port Elizabeth that they should hire an additional organiser. I was alone in Pretoria at that time, and what would the position have been if I went to jail? The branch would have died. But Port Elizabeth didn't worry about this request'.

Khumalo lists a number of other factors in the NGWU break away from MACWUSA/GWUSA: 'The workers of GWUSA in Olifantsfontein wanted to open up an office there. Port Elizabeth was reluctant to allow this'. Khumalo also isolates a personal grievance as a compounding issue: it appears that he was offered a scholarship to study labour relations in Sweden by a foreign embassy, but that the Port Elizabeth union leadership vetoed this.

Apart from criticising MACWUSA/GWUSA for their lack of democratic control, Khumalo also claims that they were very inflexible. For example, 'if one has got to use the industrial court to win certain rights for workers, then one has got to make use of it, if the time is right. They (the Port Elizabeth leadership) were totally against such a thing'.

Khumalo claims that this spirit of flexibility was present in the Pretoria branch of GWUSA/MACWUSA before the split. Asked about his participation in the Wilgespruit trade union summit walk-out - where certain unions refused to discuss unity with unions participating in industrial councils - Khumalo said that the 'decision to quit (the summit) was foisted on us by Port Elizabeth... Government Zini, (organising secretary of GWUSA and MACWUSA) and I did not want to quit, but we were forced to by the others'.

According to Khumalo, the split

with GWUSA/MACWUSA was precipitated when the whole Pretoria executive decided to resign, and called a meeting of members to explain their decision. This meeting 'decided that if we are to form another union, they are going with us as we have done a lot of good for them. That's how we formed the union!'. The majority of GWUSA members - numbering about 4 000 - joined the NGWU, and while not all of these are active or fully paid up, they remain members. Since then, says Khumalo, 'MACWUSA in Pretoria employed two new people, one of whom has already left the union; according to reports we have, it's inactive at the moment. MACWUSA has in fact already died in Pretoria. Where are they going to organise since the motor industry is already organised by NAAWU and the African Motor and Allied Workers' Union? They are just maintaining an office without members'.

In the previous edition of Work In Progress (WIP 27), MACWUSA's Government Zini made a number of claims which Khumalo strongly contests. Zini alleged that Khumalo was suspended from the union's Pretoria branch after 'irregularities' had been uncovered. Khumalo rejects this as a 'deliberate lie', saying that he in fact resigned, and was never suspended.

Zini also claimed that at the April trade union unity talks, Khumalo had sat with the MACWUSA/GWUSA delegation, although he had been told that he represented neither union. After leaving the talks early, the MACWUSA/GWUSA delegation then read in the press that Khumalo had voted against the establishment of the feasibility committee, allegedly on behalf of MACWUSA/GWUSA.

Khumalo rejects Zini's version of events. He says that he went to the unity talks as a member of the Orange-Vaal General Workers' Union delegation. 'When I arrived in Cape Town, I was approached by one of the unregistered unions. The approach was that I should join the MACWUSA delegation so as not to show the registered unions that there was a division in MACWUSA'. This was agreed to by MACWUSA/GWUSA.

Khumalo also denies that he voted against the establishment of the feasibility committee. He explains that the MACWUSA delegation had to leave the summit early, as they had their own conference in Port Elizabeth

to attend. Zini told the meeting that somebody would be left behind to represent them - that person being Khumalo, who says that 'I was given firm instructions not to take any decision whatsoever'. Khumalo says he did not vote on the feasibility committee, but merely explained that a mandate on the question of unity had still to be sought from the MACWUSA/GWUSA membership.

Khumalo further says that, after the MACWUSA/GWUSA delegation left the talks, his presence there was queried by a FOSATU representative; he then explained that he had never been suspended by MACWUSA, and was representing them in the absence of the rest of the delegation.

Although the NGWU is a general union, Khumalo believes that 'an industrial union is the most viable union. What precipitated the formation of a general union was the membership that we have in different sectors of industry. We couldn't form an industrial union, so we intend to keep it as a general union until such time as we communicate with other unions in making NGWU an industrial union'. The sector which NGWU is currently most active in is the commercial and distributive trade.

The union 'rejects registration insofar as it is designed to control and interfere in the internal affairs of trade unions. While we don't see ourselves formally participating in industrial councils, if we find a situation whereby one would have to negotiate, we would be flexible - subject to the approval of membership'.

The union is committed to the establishment of participatory structures of democracy. 'Any decision must be approved by the membership', says Khumalo. 'We call members to a meeting and ask for instructions on decisions. These general meetings take place every month with all our companies which have been organised by the union'. The union has elected shop stewards at factory floor level, and has submitted a number of recognition agreements to companies. They already have de facto recognition in some areas, with shop steward representation on disciplinary committees, structures for grievance procedure, etc. The NGWU also intends establishing a broader shop stewards council in the

future, with shop stewards from all factories organised by the union.

The NGWU has some presence in the metal, and paper and pulp industries. Surprisingly, however, it has not attempted to organise in the motor industry, which is where MACWUSA's membership lay. Khumalo explains that 'We felt we should leave out the motor industry workers so that NAAWU could strengthen itself, seeing that it is the largest union in Pretoria with the biggest membership. We felt, after discussion, that we should leave those workers in the motor industry to go into NAAWU. We are not organising in opposition to NAAWU.

The NGWU places itself firmly on the side of those unions which see a role for themselves outside of the work-place. 'A union cannot divorce itself from community issues', says Khumalo, 'because the life of the worker does not end at the factory gate. It extends into his home environment. Any community affair that affects the life of the black man, the union will come into'. While Khumalo says that the union would involve itself with non-working class elements in the township, he nonetheless accepts that there is always the potential and danger of conflicts of interest between these groups.

The NGWU is a controversial union. Born in the controversy of a split, it recently signed up a white woman employee from Pick 'n Pay. Within days, she had resigned after an incident in which Khumalo arrived at the store with a pressman to interview her. She declined to be interviewed or photographed, a decision which Khumalo attributed to intimidation from the store's manager. In the midst of this, the NGWU announced that it was negotiating procedural agreements with six of Pick 'n Pay's northern Transvaal stores. It would seem wrong, therefore, to write off the NGWU as another splinter union with charismatic leadership and no shop floor base. Time will presumably show what its contribution to a rapidly changing labour movement will be.

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