



Interview:

Mufamadi on GAWU

Trade union unity and relations with the UDF are two of the most difficult issues which trade unions have had to face recently. **WIP** interviewed **SYDNEY MUFAMADI**, general secretary of the General and Allied Workers Union (GAWU) on these questions.

WIP: How does GAWU see the relationship between working class and popular or national struggle in South Africa?

Mufamadi: There is no question that the essential problem which people in South Africa have got to address is the question of economic exploitation, which is capitalism. But there is a specific form which capitalism in this country has taken. This involves national oppression, where the African working class experiences national oppression, which is meant to maximise profits. Because of that, we see a link between the issues which workers are organising themselves around - on the factory floor and in political oppression. Workers have to address both these questions in an organised form.

WIP: Some unions argue that at this moment in South Africa's history, it is important for the working class to organise distinctly and separately from other class influences. At a particular stage, according to this view, the political and organisational confidence of the working class becomes such that it is able to move into alliance with other classes. This ensures that real and meaningful working class leadership emerges. How do you respond to this approach?

Mufamadi: We see things differently. Some want to perceive the working class as only found on the factory floor.

Our view is that even those people who are not behind machines on the factory floor can be said to be waging a working class struggle if the issues which they take up in their various sites of struggle, and the way in which they take those issues up, serve to undermine the class relations upon which the present society is built.

If we go, for instance, to the community where we find our people living in squalid conditions, these questions can be addressed in class terms. The workers cannot say that they have nothing to say about that kind of situation. Because that is the situation they are faced with. People can wage a working class political struggle around those issues which affect them, and trade unions can play a role in instilling working class consciousness.

There are people in rural areas, and we as trade unionists have limitations which we have to contend with. Our sphere of operation is the factory floor, but we need to address ourselves to those who are; for instance, in the rural areas. We don't have the necessary infrastructure as trade unions. Even if we come up with one union federation, we still will not have the infrastructure to reach people in those areas. We think, and this has been proven in practice, that the UDF does offer that kind of infrastructure. And we think that working class consciousness can be instilled into the masses of our people through this available infrastructure.

WIP: GAWU has joined the UDF. What do you see as the best form for an alliance between working class organisations and popular or community organisations in the two struggles you've outlined?

Mufamadi: All the organisations that have affiliated to the UDF have done so because they are in full agreement

with the UDF declaration. We want to see those organisations as equal partners in this united front. Ideologically speaking, we are saying that we are involved in a national democratic struggle wherein we put special emphasis on the leadership role which has to be played by the working class. If you look at the UDF declaration, there is nothing there which negates the interests of the working class. We feel that we as a trade union have got room in the UDF as much as any other progressive form of organisation, be it operating in the community, at a student level or in the women's front.

WIP: What would satisfy you that working class leadership was a fact in the struggle you spoke about, and what form should this leadership take?

Mufamadi: It is not important whether the majority of people on the UDF executive are from a trade union or not. That would be a wrong understanding of what working class politics or struggle entails. If the programme of action, which is guiding the UDF, ensures that the interests of the working class are safeguarded; and if whenever there are UDF meetings where important policy decisions are taken there is participation of representatives of the workers' organisations, that ensures that workers are represented in that sort of a front.

But we are not envisaging in an alliance of this nature that one section of the alliance will dictate to other sections what is to be done in the front. We believe that this involves some kind of common perspective of issues which has got to develop in the process of common struggles. These common struggles can only be waged if people are willing to fight together in an alliance like UDF. Working class leadership has got to emerge in that kind of process.

WIP: Let's move on to the question of GAWU's relationship to the trade union unity talks. At the March unity meeting in Johannesburg, certain unions including GAWU left the talks. What happened?

Mufamadi: There are two aspects which are central to this question: industrial unions, and progress. GAWU has long been committed to the formation of industrial unions. We see this as the form of organisation which guarantees efficiency compared to the way in which we are structured at the moment. We committed ourselves to this even before the idea of union unity talks. When the idea of the unity talks came about, we welcomed that move. Unions saw the need to unite against the onslaught from the state and against the problems that we face on a day-to-day basis on the factory floor. Our participation in a series of meetings confirms our commitment to the question of unity.

At an inter-union level, we came to realise that if we are to form one progressive trade union federation, all the unions participating will have to restructure themselves. Some are currently operating as general unions, while others are already organising themselves along federal lines.

We came to that realisation, and a commitment was made to restructure ourselves along distinct industrial lines. But no deadlines for this were set. We thought this was proper, because there is no way in which we could assert deadlines in establishing industrial unions. Setting deadlines would presuppose that we are operating in a normal, interruption-free situation. But we experience a lot of interruptions, one of them being state intervention in the running of our trade unions. Given these kinds of interruptions, and other problems which relate to material and human resources, we realised that restructuring the general unions along industrial lines would be a long process.

It is unfortunate that some of our fellow participants in the unity talks were already operating as industrial unions. Some of them were in a relatively advanced stage, and were a step ahead of other unions. But what we thought they should have done was to accommodate us in the process of forming industrial unions. If some unions are lagging behind others because of the way they were established, we saw it as our collective responsibility to work together in the transition from the present state of affairs to the end envisaged.

WIP: You have previously suggested that trade union unity is being imposed from above, not built from below. Presumably this relates to GAWU's commitment to the regional solidarity committees as a process in building unity. Had these regional solidarity committees been meeting regularly prior to the March feasibility meeting in Johannesburg?

Mufamadi: Yes, in some areas, and no with regard to other areas. The idea of the regional solidarity committees was initially mooted at our first unity conference at Langa in mid-1981. This committee did not meet much immediately after that, because of the state clampdown which came immediately after that conference. But one of the efforts of the regional solidarity committees were the one-hour stoppages called to observe the death of comrade Neil Aggett. We thought that if people could meet in that spirit, a lot of issues could be dealt with by the workers themselves. We were thinking about a situation where, for instance, shop stewards from various unions would come together and discuss common issues which affect them factory floor, and try to formulate common strategies at regional level to deal with them.

But I must say that, even though we have been meeting in the Transvaal, some of the unions never turned up. And even those unions that did meet did not meet as often as they could have done.

WIP: Did GAWU, Municipal and General Workers Union, and SAAWU walk out of the March unity meeting, or were they expelled?

Mufamadi: We did not walk out of the unity talks. Some unions felt that we were delaying the formation of a federation because we were taking too long to restructure ourselves. This was in spite of the practical problems that we tried to highlight at the unity talks. They decided that they were in a position to go ahead with our exclusion, and felt that we should be given observer status. This was totally unacceptable at that point in time: when we went to those talks we had a clear mandate to be full participants. We found ourselves in a dilemma. We could not change our status without a mandate to do so from our membership.

When we brought that to the other unions' attention, they felt that all we needed to do was to go back to our membership and give them feedback on what transpired at the talks, tell them that we had been offered a new status, and seek a fresh mandate.

WIP: Does GAWU intend to seek a different mandate from its members on the question of union unity?

Mufamadi: Not necessarily. What we have already started doing is to report to members what happened at the unity talks. The mandate they gave us is still the same at present. Our membership will have to look at the new status we have been offered, and see what kind of mandate they can give us in the light of that.

WIP: In terms of GAWU's commitment to restructure along industrial lines, what areas will you be concentrating on in the future?

Mufamadi: Historically we are a general union. GAWU emerged as a breakaway from BAWU, which was itself a general union. A lot of BAWU members decided to break away with the group establishing GAWU. That's how we became a general union.

We decided, even before the unity talks started, to assess what areas we are relatively strong in. When we feel we have the necessary human and material resources we will establish an industrial union in those particular industries. That is our objective. But the circumstances we are operating in change from time to time. For example in 1982 we realised that the Municipal and General Workers Union was organising in the railway sector, and we were also organising there. We felt that we should combine our respective membership and come up with one union for railway workers. This has since been established.

WIP: Are there other areas where GAWU is close to the establishment of industrial unions?

Mufamadi: If one looks at the extent of our organised presence in the metal industry, we think we can come up with an industrial union. But we decided to

shelve that idea because although we've got a strong presence, there is already an established union - MAWU - in that industry. MAWU is one of the unions participating with us in the unity talks. When the idea of bilateral discussions between unions organising in the same industry was raised, we felt that we could come together with MAWU and look at the possibility of a merger. This would facilitate the formation of a unified trade union federation.

WIP: So you are saying that in relations with MAWU, you have been a positive participant in the question of demarcation?

Mufamadi: Yes. We did commit ourselves to the question of industrial demarcation, and we saw it as an obligation on our part to sit down with any union organising in an area where we were also organised. Even the consideration of a merger was positive.

WIP: Have you signed your members in the metal industry over to MAWU?

Mufamadi: No, but that is one possibility we were toying with. Unfortunately, we were then asked to take a new status in the unity talks, and that status does not enable us to discuss that question with MAWU at the moment. But when unions were asked whether they could commit themselves to meeting with other unions where they overlap in areas of organisation, we indicated that we would be prepared to sit with MAWU in as far as our membership in the metal industry is concerned, and also with the Food and Canning Workers Union.

WIP: What are GAWU's long-term plans on trade union unity, given that you've now been offered observer status only, and that you're not able to accept that?

Mufamadi: We still see ourselves as very much part of the unity talks. That is why we see the coming mandate which our members will give us as very crucial, and something which cannot be hastily decided on. We need a lot of

discussion within GAWU itself.

We have no ill feelings towards those still participating in the unity talks. When we get a mandate, we will see how those participating in the unity talks can accommodate whatever mandate we have been given. We don't think that the doors for co-operation with those unions, either individually or collectively, have been closed. We are still trying to co-operate with them as ever before. All possibilities are still there for us to work towards unity with them.

WIP: One final question on GAWU's strength: how many signed up and paid up members does GAWU have?

Mufamadi: One cannot be categorical about this. It's a fluctuating position. Last year, for example, we experienced recession, and this affected organisation. Our current estimate is that our signed up membership is 30 000; and paid up membership in the region of 18 000



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