

Erosion of union solidarity

Many academics (Adler and Webster) have pointed to the decline in the power and militancy of unions post-1994.

Baskin (2000: 43-44) observes that 'during the 1970s and 1980s working people built their union into a powerful fighting force'. On many occasions they transcended the boundaries of their workplaces to organise around political issues. Their role in the struggle against apartheid and class oppression demonstrated militancy and the power unions used to enjoy. Workers experienced growing strength and confidence in their unions despite dismissals and other forms of intimidations that employers used against them.

For instance, in the 1980s the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (Ccawusa), the forerunner of Saccawu, struggled for wages and better conditions at Southern Sun Hotels and OK Bazaars respectively, and forced management to yield to workers' demands. Workers attributed the victory of their struggle to the growth of their powerful union and, most importantly, solidarity that existed among them.

Ccawusa's successful victories during the 1980s, despite its internal problems, showed the importance of solidarity amongst workers. Some writers argue that solidarity is constructed and expressed through a process of mutual association. Black workers under the apartheid regime perceived the

In the post-1994 period solidarity among workers in many workplaces was seriously undermined. Nathaniel Ndala looks at the factors leading to the erosion of solidarity in a Saccawu branch in the retail sector on the East Rand.

government and white people generally as symbols of oppression. They saw themselves oppressed as workers but most importantly, because they were black. This sense of common identity brought them together irrespective of their differences in terms of their job categories. Solidarity was therefore, easily forged under the apartheid regime.

In the 1990s things began to change and the power and militancy of unions began to diminish. This decline and subsequent erosion of union solidarity can be attributed to a number of factors including: a loss of skills and significant leadership to government, corporates and other sectors; poor servicing of members and the growing gap between leadership and rank and file members.

Case study of Saccawu branch

A study of a local Saccawu branch on the

East Rand during the period 1988 to 2000 reveals however, that Adler and Webster's transition theory (2000) underestimated factors of labour market flexibility. This development proved to be equally significant in accounting for the erosion of solidarity in the union post-1994.

The local branch used as a case study here proved that the introduction of casual workers and subcontractors undermined solidarity that the union had spent years building up. Uncritical and blind acceptance of labour market flexibility by Saccawu, as a form of efficiency and cost minimisation, might lead to the end of the union in many workplaces. This, however, should not be construed, as saying that other factors should be underestimated.

Breakdown in trust

When the store (part of this case study) was opened in 1988, Saccawu's national organisers were actively involved in the formation of the union in the store. Even after the union was established national organisers continued to support the union in the store. They frequently visited the shopstewards and the workers and served as a link between the union in the store and the national leadership.

Workers in the local branch were always kept abreast about the activities and the direction of the national leadership through monthly meetings held with their organisers. This important link between the store and the national organisers stopped immediately after the 'micro-loans disaster'. (see p 66)

The organisers encouraged workers to borrow loans against their provident funds only to find that they were taking personal loans from Perm Bank. When the deductions appeared on workers' pay-slips organisers stopped visiting the store. Workers and the shopstewards tried unsuccessfully, on many occasions, to try

to get organisers to come and explain this problem. Their disappearance led to ties with the branch being cut while serious mistrust grew towards the union and their shopstewards who assisted the organisers in convincing the workers to borrow against their provident funds.

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The leadership and the union were discredited by this incident. Workers blamed their shopstewards for misleading and misinforming them. The shopstewards on the other hand pointed fingers at their organisers who did not properly explain things to them.

As a result, many workers resigned from the union, as they felt betrayed by their own union. 'We don't want the union because it sold us. Some of the workers went home with nothing after the deduction,' said one interviewee. In many instances during the interviews, respondents referred to the organisers as 'that union'. The union was not them but the organisers. Phrases such as 'the union' and 'that union' were often used during the interviews. The workers saw the organisers as one union and them as another one.

Workers and leadership

The division between rank and file members and leaders became evident when the store began to look at recruiting casual workers. The union in the store did not even know about the resolution to organise casual workers, which was taken

at the union's annual congress in July 1999.

Union leadership claimed in interviews that the process to recruit casuals had begun but the union in the store did not know about this. The union in the store said no one had informed them about the official position regarding casual workers. This reinforces the view of the growing gap between the union in the store and Saccawu national office. Furthermore workers in the store did not know about the rolling mass action call by Cosatu in October 1999. The lack of interaction can create a scenario where two separate unions begin to emerge but share the same name.

Impact of outsourcing

In the OK Bazaars store where the case study was done, a decision was taken to subcontract out their shelf packers to Executive Merchandising Service (EMS) and Dedicated Merchandising Service (DMS).

The two companies were introduced into the store in 1996. A rival union – Eccawusa – began recruiting members amongst the new contract companies. These workers did not only perceive the union as their legal voice against employers' prerogative power, but most importantly, as a shield against Hyperama staff who regarded them as 'enemies'. As one of the workers recalled, 'we were like enemies.

All the jobs that we used to do were now given to them'. On the other side, while workers of DMS and EMS companies belonged to Eccawusa, Hyperama employers still found their home in Saccawu.

Workers in the same workplace were employed by three different employers and split between two unions. This makes solidarity among workers extremely difficult and impossible. The tension that

existed between these workers shifted what class theory saw as an inherent conflict that exists between employers and employees. Workers in this store identified themselves with their respective companies. They did not see themselves as members of the same class, but as employees of their companies.

When Shoprite took over from OK in 1997, it did not hesitate to undermine the solidarity in the union by employing more casual workers. Full-time workers who resigned or were retrenched were gradually replaced with casual workers. Numerous subcontract companies replaced the two subcontract companies in the store. This made it even more difficult for the union to organise effectively in the store.

This form of work impacted negatively on the union, which was once regarded as the legitimate voice of workers against unfair labour practices by employers.

References

- Adler, G and Webster, E (eds) (2000) Trade unions and democratisation in South Africa, 1985-1997, London: Macmillan.*
Baskin, J (1999) Striking back: A History of Cosatu, Johannesburg: Ravan.

This is an edited version of an MA thesis submitted to the faculty of Arts at the University of Witwatersrand.

Correction notice

In editing the article 'Labour internationalism at a turning point' (SA Labour Bulletin 26 (1)), the editor inadvertently added a sentence that incorrectly imputed racial motives to the Australian trade union delegation in the debate on the 'war against terrorism'. The Labour Bulletin apologises for this.