

Workers and the community

CHEMICAL WORKERS from the Phalaborwa local describe the community struggles in their area in the period 1984-86. They draw the link between these struggles and the political policy adopted by their union, CWIU.

The process of unionisation in Phalaborwa was initiated by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in April 1984, and after gaining ground the workers from Fedmis-Phalaborwa also displayed the interest of joining the union. The NUM organiser then contacted the office of the South African Chemical Workers Union (SACWU), as both unions were affiliates of the then Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA).

The two unions then developed a practical working relationship and in some stages they were calling for joint general meetings to promote trade union education. In October 1985 NUM disaffiliated from CUSA

and affiliated to COSATU. In February 1986 the Phalaborwa branch of SACWU also disaffiliated, and joined the COSATU affiliate, CWIU.

Organs of people's power

In 1985, rudimentary organs of people's power emerged all over Phalaborwa. This was a direct response to

the harassment of students who were the leading force for democratically elected SRCs. Reactionary school committees were colluding with the police, and generally meetings of workers and students were violently disrupted. Parents were also prevented



UNIONS AND POLITICS

from discussing the schooling crisis by the school committees in collaboration with the police.

The Fedmis-Phalaborwa workers as part of the Phalaborwa community were effectively participating in those structures of people's power. These channels enabled them to mix with the UDF affiliates. One of our shopstewards was serving in the executive committee of the Namakgale Parents Crisis Committee, a UDF affiliate. Also four shopstewards were responsible for the launching of the once active Namakgale Youth Congress, also a UDF affiliate.

During a strike in Feb 1985, Fedmis workers also organised and ran the Operation Hunger Feeding Scheme for themselves and the communities of Namakgale, Makhushane, Maseke, Lulekani and Mashimale. Upon their returning to work, the whole project was run by a committee comprising two representatives from each of the communities mentioned above. The emphasis has always been that those in the communities who benefit from the scheme should be destitutes and unemployed people. This is so even up to the present day.

The arrival of the UDF

In order to understand this situation, you have to understand how the UDF came into our area.

In 1976 to 1982 Phalaborwa like other areas in the far north was dominated by black consciousness (BC). There were no other organisations not

adhering to the black consciousness philosophy. Then in 1983 the UDF was launched, and in 1984 the student's struggle for democratically elected SRCs was launched, and Phalaborwa was no exception. There were debates among students and youth about the appropriate home between BC organisations and the UDF.

The late Comrade Alf Nkadimeng who was working for SAAWU [SA Allied Workers Union] was also involved in organising workers who fell outside the scope of NUM, SACWU and CCAWUSA. He used to come with Turfloop students and comrades from UDF Northern Transvaal down to Phalaborwa. The students concentrated on the organisation of the schools, whereas the UDF comrades were organising the youth and the community. That was in 1984, around June and July.

The debates and discussions were held in meetings. T-shirts were sold to the people, and political songs and slogans were the order of the day to popularise the UDF. As usual everywhere, some were hesitating and resisting, but they were a very small number.

The Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO) [now called SANSCO, the South African National Students Congress] at Turfloop university, in collaboration with the northern Transvaal region of UDF, organised workshops for students, youth and workers, and ultimately it became evident that Congress politics dominated the whole of Phalaborwa. Namakgale Youth Congress was formed, fol-

lowed by Mashishimale Youth Congress and late in 1985 Lulekani Youth Congress. Mashishimale is a village near Namakgale, and Lulekani is a township in Gazankulu, 17 km from Namakgale.

Early in 1986 the Namakgale Parents Crisis Committee was formed. In all these structures our workers and shopstewards were either in the top leadership or active members. NUM and CCAWUSA were also participating actively in these structures.

Union political policy

In COSATU's CWIU we are proud of the political resolution democratically debated in two congresses and finally adopted with an overwhelming majority. It was built after hectic debates. Shopstewards from all the locals nationally met and debated on this policy, adjourned to get fresh mandates from the various locals, met again and adopted a political policy which accommodated everyone.

The CWIU policy shows that CWIU sees itself as part of the extra-parliamentary opposition. In South Africa you cannot be a trade union that truly represents its members without being involved in political battles for the liberation of the whole people. Trade unions, in alliance with progressive mass-based organisations are entitled to act in the interests of all the oppressed and exploited masses of our country. It is imperative to adopt policies and resolutions that will enable you to form alliances.

We are not observers in the heat of the struggle. Our policies have developed out of our struggles.

Not only that, but we are proud of our union's position and commitment to the broader unity of the working class in this country. At the recent COSATU Special Congress we were one of the unions which pushed for the conference of all the extra-parliamentary organisations genuinely opposed to apartheid.

The unity of the oppressed and exploited masses of our country is crucial, therefore people or organisations invited to any anti-apartheid indaba should be genuinely opposed to apartheid. We cannot invite people or organisations with no mass support or constituency to report back to and get mandates from.

The broader unity of the working class will be the unity of COSATU, NACTU, all the independent unions and working class political organisations, youth and students. On the other hand, the conference of all the extra-parliamentary organisations genuinely opposed to apartheid will include the above organisations, as well as professional groupings such as teachers, lawyers and doctors.

The worker summit is able to build a very strong fighting weapon against the employers and the ruling class. The recent summit brought together different unions from different traditions. It also exposed some leaders who lack respect for consultation on the ground. Future worker summits can focus on the question of one country, one federation. ☆