



Background — workers show their support for SAAWU. Inset from left to right — Eric Mntonga, chairperson Wilson Rowntree executive committee member, Bangumzi Sifingo, Branch executive committee, Herbert Barnabas, SAAWU National Organizer.

# 'Unity should be the watchword of the union movement'

SAAWU calls for unity between progressive trade unions 'so that they can speak with one voice'

**Q:** When and where was SAAWU started?

**A:** SAAWU's headquarters are in Durban. In fact that's where SAAWU started and then from there it was extended to East London. You know prior to the advent of SAAWU in East London the workers were totally un trade unionised. In fact East London was declared a starting point in 1980 so we had to concentrate on East London. Because as I said the workers in East London were totally un unionised. So it was felt that we should stay in the East London area to sort of, you know, arouse the consciousness of the workers to a commendable level of awareness. To create a powerful base, and then we can move from this powerful base to other places as well. Mr Barnabas who is our national organiser is a full time official — he's going to organise the Reef and I think we'll be moving to the Free State pretty soon, and the Western Cape as well. It's going to be an easy job I think, because the success of SAAWU is along the course of development of the trade union movement in South Africa since 1919.

**Q:** What is SAAWU's attitude to registration?

**A:** We believe that if we go and register, we will be embracing all those draconian laws which amount to a genocide against the working class and the black workers in particular. So we can't participate in the act of our own oppression and exploitation — that's why we say no dice to registration.

In any capitalist society there are two contending forces — that is the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The state will always side with the bosses — they will try to repress the feelings of the workers or try to quell the movements of the workers which are aimed at the total liberation of the working class and the toiling masses in this country.

**Q:** How are workers organised within SAAWU?

**A:** Like I said initially we organise the workers and if we have more than 60 percent members we start approaching

management. We believe in organising the workers first. They must know what they want — they must know that there is a need to join a trade union — then we approach management. Organising the workers is in fact our major task in helping the toiling masses.

**Q:** Do you believe in collective leadership?

**A:** Yes, we believe that leadership should be collective — as I said initially we don't want to create a bureaucracy. We want workers to be the decision makers. We further firmly believe in active mass participation and mass participatory democracy. And with that philosophy we are sure to be in a position to bring in all the workers and all democratic minded people.

**Q:** Do you see the struggle as non-racial?

**A:** Yes we believe that South Africa has got a non-racial future — we have looked beyond the horizon and we want to start right away now in organising our people in conformity with a future non-racial South Africa. We believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it — black or white. The future of South Africa is in

the hands of its workers — only the workers in alliance with all other progressive minded sections of the community can build a happy life for all South Africans. But workers should be the vanguard.

**Q:** What is SAAWU's relationship to Macwusa?

**A:** Macwusa have the same "line" and we have a good relationship. At some stage we hope to come closer together and form one united front. In fact this is what we're aiming for — that all the genuinely progressive trade unions will at some stage come together and speak with one voice.

The strategy of all progressive trade unions is to organise the workers as is the case down there in Port Elizabeth. All the Macwusa members were at one stage members of another union. Our strategy is one of mass participatory democracy — one of active participation of the workers. The strategy of progressive unions is different from other unions in that we believe in worker control of the body and mass commitment of the workers — all the workers. So we organise the workers and then the workers

will join the ranks of any progressive union. We don't consider the academics and the intellectuals who don't really have the interests of the workers at heart — we're trying to state the case as it is.

**Q:** Should trade unions organise outside the factories?

**A:** The exploitation does not end on the shop floor, it goes beyond the factories to the locations. In the locations we experience other forms of exploitation rents, housing, the compounds, paying for children's education and so on. It doesn't end on the shop floor and even the labour laws are being made by the politicians that I referred to earlier.

**Q:** Do you think that trade unions should align themselves with political groups or get involved in politics?

**A:** We believe that trade unionism should extend beyond the shop floor to the squalid conditions we live under in the locations or villages. In fact we believe that if you are pricked by a thorn you must use another one to take it out — our fate was decided for us long ago by politicians (in the houses of parlia-

ment). If we wanted to solve the problem we must act politically — there is no other way.

**Q:** Could you explain SAAWU's tension with the "Ciskeian authorities"?

**A:** In the "Ciskei" we are fighting a three fold problem. The bosses, the South African authorities and now the so called "Ciskeian government" which is assuming the role of a junior partner in the exploitation and oppression of the fellow black South Africans.

And now, Sebe is on record having said that trade unions are redundant in the so called Ciskeian territory. He is trying to end the support that SAAWU enjoys from the workers. We have difficulty trying to find halls there to hold our meetings and even offices. This alone shows that Sebe is anti worker, if I may say so. These workers are the people who will be dragged unwillingly into so called independence. He does not want to please them.

**Q:** Do you think that there are too many general workers unions?

You know SAAWU is constituted as a federation — in fact it is a federation, but seeing that the workers, or the working class in South Africa was in the hands of some irrelevant trade unions SAAWU had to go out of its way to organise workers on the shop floor. That is why SAAWU is presently operating as a General union, but at some stage we shall try — in fact we are doing — we are organising the workers according to the type of job they are engaged in and we shall assist them to form unions of their own. We shall organise them along industrial lines and at some stage into sub-unions of SAAWU.

In East London we've already got sub-unions like the Chemical and Allied Workers Union, the Sweet and Beverage Workers Union, and Road Sea Transport Allied Workers Union — it is the intention of SAAWU to group these industries into sub-unions so they can stand on their own feet pushing on a common line.