

A PUBLIC SECTOR ALTERNATIVE: SAMWU'S EFFORTS

**By John Pape, *South African Labour Bulletin*,
Volume 25, Number 4, August 2001 pp. 45-50**

In South Africa, service delivery is completely unacceptable. Apartheid backlogs make transforming service delivery more difficult. In many instances, the state has responded with strategies giving the private sector a key role. Millions of rands have been spent promoting partnerships between government and business. Almost no resources have been devoted to exploring how to restructure the public sector.

Government's extensive promotion of public-private partnerships has put most unions on the defensive. For years, the fatal flaw in most trade union struggles against privatisation has been to focus solely on protecting jobs. In a country where more than a third of the working class is unemployed, protecting the gains of public sector workers is a difficult exercise.

However, SAMWU has tried to put forward alternative plans for public sector restructuring. The union has developed pilot projects such as the Odi public-public partnership. But there has been no national process aimed at restructuring service delivery to communities.

Beyond halting or delaying

Before the local government elections in December last year, SAMWU planned a series of workshops on problems of the transition. SAMWU were to hold two rounds of workshops at the national and provincial level. The first would deal with job-related issues: placement, changing structures and the organisational rights agreement. The second would address service delivery. Unlike others, this programme intended to go beyond the legal tools to halt or delay privatisation. It intended to develop an approach to the restructuring of services.

This appears to be the most sustained national effort by a union to develop its own proposals and strategy for restructuring public sector delivery. The workshops are only the beginning of a long and complex process. Nevertheless, they are an important milestone in developing a union response to service delivery in historically oppressed communities.

This article gives an overview and analysis of the workshops. The first section summarises the aims and content of the workshops. The second section presents an overview of the trends in service delivery in various provinces. The third section outlines how participants engaged with the workshop learning process. The final section looks at the outcomes of the workshops and offers some analysis.

Aims and content

From April to June this year, workshops were held in all provinces except Gauteng. Each workshop lasted two days. The main aims were to examine the form and extent of restructuring service delivery and to develop proposals for SAMWU's strategy for advancing public sector delivery in each province. ILRIG facilitators and SAMWU national and regional educators planned the workshops. Funding came from the South African Labour Development Trust.

At one level, the workshops were a dialogue between national and provincial structures. Each programme began with an input by a national official on the union's overall approach to service delivery. This gave broad direction, emphasising the need to link workplace issues with community issues of service delivery. A provincial office bearer (usually the secretary) then presented an overview of developments in service delivery in the province. Participants added their own experience and discussed key issues.

The workshop was designed to encourage participants to reflect on how to transform services to the benefit of the communities. This was done through two activities. The first involved groups reading and analysing cases of successful public sector restructuring. Two international examples were used: the participatory local government budgeting process in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and a union-led internal restructuring of local government departments in Malung, Sweden. The third case study dealt with SAMWU's own public-public partnership for water services in Odi.

The international examples were included for two reasons. Firstly, supporters of privatisation, such as the World Bank, argue that international experience demonstrates the necessity of enhancing the role of business in service delivery. The case studies offer an alternative view. Moreover, carefully chosen international case studies can be an effective way of emphasising that public sector workers around the world face similar problems.

The second activity involved simulation and role-playing. Participants were given the details of the water service in an imaginary municipality. The profile was similar to that of many South African municipalities: low payment levels, poor or non-existent services to informal settlements, inaccurate billing and extensive illegal connections. Some municipal officials were eager to set up a partnership with a French company, while others wanted to give the union a chance to make a proposal. Participants then had to draw up a restructuring plan and present it to the "management". The facilitator played the role of the CEO, with other participants being 'co-opted' onto the management. The plans were then presented and aggressively questioned by the municipality's management. Once this was completed, the participants discussed and analysed the role-play in terms of how it related to the union experience of such processes.

The last session of the workshop, facilitated by the provincial educator, involved making recommendations on the way forward for service delivery in the province. Although the workshop did not have the status of a union structure, in most instances top provincial leaders and the heads of restructuring committees attended. The recommendations carried considerable weight.

Service delivery trends

In every province, a wide spectrum of functions had been outsourced or handed over entirely to the private sector. These ranged from bus services in Durban and the privatisation of stormwater in Middelburg, to the outsourcing of motor vehicle registration in parts of the Northern Province and the Northern Cape. In most cases the reason given for outsourcing was a lack of council capacity. Yet, in many instances, work was outsourced even when existing staff was employed to do the job. For example, in several Western Cape municipalities, parts of the cleaning function were outsourced while the existing workforce were inactive or given other work to do. There seems to be a deliberate attempt to create a lack of capacity, which then becomes the motive for privatisation.

A number of key issues and debates emerged. The question arose whether outsourcing that does not affect existing jobs and conditions of service is a problem. This was particularly controversial when the municipality provided jobs for the unemployed.

For example, in one Mpumalanga municipality, meter-reading was outsourced to a private company. There were so many complaints about inaccurate billing that the contract was cancelled. Community members were then employed for the task. In Delft in the Western Cape, the South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) led a march to the offices of the municipality. It demanded that certain functions be outsourced to community members as a way of creating jobs. This was a major theme in most of the workshops. How does SAMWU build alliances with community structures to promote local economic development without undermining union gains for members?

Another important issue, which surfaced in nearly every province, was the union's involvement in the municipal restructuring exercise. The two most frequently mentioned examples were integrated development plans (IDPs) and local labour forums (LLFs).

The legislation requires long-term IDPs to include extensive consultation with communities. Generally, this is not taking place, and workshop participants felt it was a key area where SAMWU should intervene and build community links. In only one municipality, Nala in the Free State, did participants express satisfaction with the IDP process. This could be because the mayor of Nala is a former SAMWU member. Other areas reported consultant-driven processes, or attempts by municipalities to cut and paste from previous plans.

Local Labour Forums are municipal level bargaining structures that have been formed by a decision at the National Bargaining Council. Only the Free State reported that LLFs had been set up in every municipality. In Northern Province and North West, few, if any, LLFs were operating. In KwaZulu-Natal, most municipalities lacked forums. Apart from the question of setting up LLFs, a thorny issue was how to empower them. As they are forums for consultation, there was concern as to how the proposals agreed in them could be forwarded to negotiating structures.

A last point is that SAMWU has successfully contested attempts by local authorities to outsource certain functions or put them out to tender. In the Free State, an attempt to privatise water in Bloemfontein was blocked. In the Western Cape, there were successful anti-privatisation initiatives in Montagu involving extensive mass action. In Sedibeng in Gauteng, the Municipal

Systems Act was used to block outsourcing. There were other successes too, many of them not even widely known by SAMWU members from the same province. Free State provincial secretary Jonas Nhlapo noted: ‘In SAMWU we’ve got victories, but we don’t apply them consistently.’

Engagement by participants

Generally, participants took a little while to shift from thinking about the employment-related aspects of restructuring and focus on service delivery. Once the hurdle was crossed, participants began to relate content to key strategic questions. For instance, the discussion of the Porto Alegre budgeting process sparked discussion about whether IDPs could be used in a similar way. In North West, this led to a broader political debate about whether Porto Alegre’s success depended on the fact that a workers’ party dominated the municipality. The debate also looked at whether ANC-ruled municipalities would promote such a form of popular control.

Initially, many participants were put off by the Swedish case study. This case study involved workers researching their jobs and coming up with ways to reorganise their departments. They argued that Swedish workers were more literate than South African shopstewards. However, a question was asked as to whether a meeting of workers in the water service could detail service problems and ways they could be addressed. Participants agreed that ‘our members’ could do this. The discussion led one participant to comment: ‘We need to encourage workers to talk about issues like how water can be purified.’

The Odi case study prompted a range of responses. In the Free State, many people concluded that such partnerships were not possible as long as government’s Gear policy remained in place. Others blamed the problems in Odi on SAMWU itself, arguing that the union had not strongly defended the initiative. In North West, a large part of the workshop was dedicated to charting a way forward for Odi, including mobilising international support. A key point registered in all provinces was that the Odi project would not have taken off without community involvement. As shopsteward, Edwin Mahloma said: ‘Alone, SAMWU cannot succeed.’

In nearly all provinces, workshops reached their peak with the role-play. Some groups developed extensive plans in a very short time, indicating planning skills and a detailed knowledge of the water service. Participants were caught somewhat off guard by the harshness with which neo-liberal municipal managers interrogated their plans. But in every province, participants agreed that the exercise was useful in terms of beginning to think about how to restructure service delivery and how to engage management. Participants repeatedly made the comment that ‘this is exactly how management acts’.

Perhaps the most interesting event in the role-play occurred in Northern Province. On the first day of the workshop, a participant produced a letter indicating that the Polokwane municipality planned to put out a tender for street cleaning. No one from the union had been informed of the tender. Instead of using the standard role-play, one group was given the letter and asked to draw up a plan to which the union would respond. A detailed plan was drafted, included a proposal to involve shopstewards in research on cleaning work. Since the Polokwane branch chair and the

head of the provincial restructuring committee attended the workshop, it was decided to declare a dispute the next day. The tender initiative was blocked – a quick and measurable outcome!

Outcomes and analysis

Not all outcomes of the workshop were as plain as the Polokwane example. And given the number of municipalities represented, a comprehensive follow-up is difficult. However, the workshops seem to have highlighted a number of challenges facing the union and moved some provinces and branches towards solutions. Not long after the Western Cape workshop, the Cape Metro branch initiated participatory research involving shopstewards. On May 30, shopstewards from every depot in the three trading services came to the offices and outlined developments at their depot. A report was compiled and six depots were chosen as sites where a fully-fledged internal restructuring plan would be developed by the union.

In Polokwane, the municipality tried to outsource other functions after the street-cleaning debacle. However, the union secured a written undertaking from the mayor, Thabo Makunyane, that no function or section of council would be privatised and that no job cuts were contemplated.

While this represents progress, it is far from adequate to deal with the onslaught against public sector service delivery. Such workshops can help a critical layer of leadership to develop alternatives. Moreover, meeting and reflecting on service delivery is imperative, given the overwhelming tasks confronting the union on workplace issues. For the union to defend its members' jobs and improve service delivery, more education and research will be needed. But ultimately, the struggle will not be won with education and research.

The issues and debates covered in these workshops need to filter down to the shopfloor. In virtually all the workshops, participants recognised that they, as leaders, were well informed. But those on the shopfloor, particularly in smaller, more rural municipalities, often operated almost alone.

Also, as every workshop and virtually every successful international struggle for public sector delivery indicated, the union must build stronger ties with communities. Said DJ Khoza, North West provincial chairperson: 'We have distanced ourselves from the community...we are right to say every struggle of SAMWU is a struggle of the community.'

In the absence of strong community structures like the civics of the 1980s and 1990s, building these alliances can be difficult. But working class communities countrywide are gearing up for action on service delivery issues. In many instances, some of their hostility is directed at municipal workers whom they view as privileged, inefficient or both. The privatisers are exploiting such feelings to promise employment for community members in projects which transfer service delivery to a transnational corporation or black entrepreneur.

Samwu has tried to forge links with communities in a number of ways, including participating in anti-privatisation forums in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Several other provinces spoke of setting up such structures. While such forums may be important, the real challenge is to extend

the their influence beyond a narrow circle of dedicated activists. And while the forums are addressing issues of public sector delivery, their very name indicates that their focus is to combat privatisation.

John Pape is the ILRIG project coordinator. He and Mthetho Xali facilitated the workshops. This education programme was linked to the research programme of the Municipal Services Project.