Empowering the Unemployed

Professor Valerie Møller, Centre for Social & Development Studies, University of Natal

The emergence of a fledgling union for the unemployed is a rather extraordinary event. With no bargaining power or representation in the country’s collective bargaining forums, this large marginalised sector remain out of jobs and out of sight. The author of a series of recent surveys identifies a range of functions that the unemployed believe trade unions and community groups could perform to both highlight and ameliorate their predicament.

Unemployment will still be with us in the new South Africa. This is the viewpoint expressed by the majority of the unemployed. Clearly, new and imaginative methods of combating the problems related to unemployment will be called for to sustain a decent standard of living and an acceptable quality of life for people out of work.

Recent research has revealed that the unemployed are not altogether optimistic about their current and future job opportunities:

- 66% fear that they will never find work;
- 68% believe that South African unemployment is a symptom of worldwide trends;
- 55% believe that there will be a shortage of jobs in South Africa in future due to population trends.

At the same time, the unemployed express expectations for a better deal for the currently unemployed in the new era:

- 83% believe that in a society without apartheid there will be enough jobs for everyone;
- 85% believe that when the economy looks up there will be enough jobs for people like themselves.

In this climate of uncertainty and raised expectations there is a dire need for both financial and moral support for the unemployed. The recent launching of a trade union for the unemployed (Weekly Mail, 19-25/10/90) is a good omen.

Union Brokers

The unemployed themselves are of the opinion that trade unions can play an important role in meeting the expectations and needs of the unemployed. Research carried out in three waves during the period 1987 and 1989 (see data base) identified a number of possible roles for trade unions which could turn the fortune of the unemployed.

Respondents participating in the first wave of research in late 1987 pointed out that many unemployed persons were former trade union members and therefore deserving of and entitled to trade union support. Trade unions had a responsibility and obligation to assist the retrenched, especially in the case of workers who had been involved in strike action.

These respondents volunteered a number of ways in which trade unions could provide support and assistance to the unemployed. Recommendations can be grouped under four headings:

- **lobbying functions**
  Trade unions can negotiate re-employment for retrenched workers, persuade overseas companies to remain in South Africa or return, and exert pressure on the state and industry to create new job opportunities.

- **job securement and job placement**
  Trade unions can assist the retrenched and school leavers with their job search by organising training and reskilling programmes and by setting up labour bureaux.

- **financial relief**
  Stop gap measures to provide for basic needs include the provision of temporary jobs, emergency relief for families, and the creation of an unemployment fund to which workers would have contributed while still employed.

- **support function**
  A further measure is support for informal groups of unemployed who meet regularly to discuss problems and find ways to help themselves.

The nationwide opinion poll conducted during the third wave of research in late 1989 confirms the need for trade unions to champion the cause of the unemployed as well as that of people in jobs. The majority of urban blacks in and out of jobs do not

82
recommend that trade unions concern themselves exclusively with the needs of people in jobs. Understandably, the unemployed are more inclined to stress this viewpoint.

There is general support for a multi-pronged approach to assist the unemployed. Substantial proportions endorse the need for trade unions to become involved in the various routes for action outlined above. Prominence is given to negotiating with employers to re-employ the retrenched and to keep jobs open. There is also support for stopgap measures: reskilling, temporary jobs, and emergency relief for families of the unemployed.

The relatively high percentages of ‘don’t know’ responses may be a reflection of widespread feelings of powerlessness in the face of mass unemployment.

Community organisations would be expected to assist the unemployed along similar lines as the trade unions, except that they are seen to be less well positioned to negotiate re-employment. The survey results suggest that community organisations and trade unions could co-operate with one another and share the burden of looking after the unemployed. The traditional broker role, pressing for re-employment of retrenched workers, is clearly seen as the preserve of trade unions. A common view appears to be that emergency relief is best left to community organisations.

If trade unions extend their services to the unemployed it will be important to take into consideration the reactions of their current members. A comparison between the poll results of union members and the unemployed suggests that the two groups see trade union intervention in a somewhat different light.

Trade union members give top priority to a lobbying role for trade unions; lobbying for job creation and preservation, in particular

### Recommendations for Assistance to the Unemployed - 1989 National Opinion Poll

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What trade unions could do</th>
<th>What community organisations could do:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lobbying for job creation and preservation</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Negotiate re-employment</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Keep big employers in South Africa</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Pressure for job creation</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job security/placement</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Run job skills programmes</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Run employment bureaux</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial relief</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide temporary jobs</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide emergency relief for families</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Institute an unemployment fund</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help to self-help</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide support for self-help groups</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Refer to other agents</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong> (n1002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Let other organisations assist; trade unions must look after the employed</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTES**

* Respondents selected 2 options. Options paraphrased.

**The question read:** “Can you please tell me what the two most important things are, if any, that trade unions/community leaders could do to assist workers who have lost their job?”

**The ten given answer categories read:** • Organise training programmes to improve workers’ job skills; • organise/create temporary jobs for unemployed people; • exert pressure on government and industrial leaders to create new job opportunities; • negotiate with employers to re-employ retrenched or fired workers; • persuade overseas companies not to leave the country so that workers keep their jobs; • operate an employment bureau/let workers know of job vacancies; • provide emergency relief to families of unemployed; • establish an unemployment fund to which workers contribute while they are still employed; • assist groups of unemployed people, who meet to discuss their problems and find ways to help themselves; • let other organisations assist unemployed people/trade unions must look after the employed.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The financial assistance of the Human Sciences Research Council and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation towards the research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper, or conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not to be attributed either to these sponsors or to any other persons.

**METHOD**

A series of studies among the unemployed were conducted during the period 1987 and 1989 in three waves:

1. The first wave of research carried out in 1987 was an in-depth study of 286 self-identified unemployed in three urban areas: Durban, Soweto, and Mdantsane outside East London.
2. The second wave of research was conducted in early 1989 among 1,053 unemployed in the same three areas, but focused exclusively on KwaMashu in the Durban area. A representative probability sample of 351 unemployed adults was drawn in each of these areas.
3. The third wave of research was a 1989 opinion poll commissioned by the author and carried out by Market Research Africa, using a probability sample of 1,022 black adults residing in urban areas. In the total sample 163 persons were trade union members and 279 persons were unemployed.

The possible roles for trade unions in assisting the unemployed were identified in the first round of research. The former trade union members participating in the second wave of research were asked to select the two most important among these roles. The same method was applied in the opinion poll which introduced a control question concerning the role of community organisations in assisting the unemployed.

There is general support for a multi-pronged approach to assist the unemployed. Substantial proportions endorse the need for trade unions to become involved in the various routes for action outlined above. Prominence is given to negotiating with employers to re-employ the retrenched and to keep jobs open. There is also support for stopgap measures: reskilling, temporary jobs, and emergency relief for families of the unemployed.

The relatively high percentages of ‘don’t know’ responses may be a reflection of widespread feelings of powerlessness in the face of mass unemployment.

**Community organisations would be expected to assist the unemployed along similar lines as the trade unions, except that they are seen to be less well positioned to negotiate re-employment.** The survey results suggest that community organisations and trade unions could co-operate with one another and share the burden of looking after the unemployed. The traditional broker role, pressing for re-employment of retrenched workers, is clearly seen as the preserve of trade unions. A common view appears to be that emergency relief is best left to community organisations.

If trade unions extend their services to the unemployed it will be important to take into consideration the reactions of their current members. A comparison between the poll results of union members and the unemployed suggests that the two groups see trade union intervention in a somewhat different light.

Trade union members give top priority to a lobbying role for trade unions; lobbying for job creation and preservation, in particular
multinational firms. The stopgap measures favoured by the union members are emergency relief and an unemployment contributory fund, while the unemployed are more inclined to opt for job skilling and temporary jobs. Notwithstanding the question whether the currently unemployed would benefit from an unemployment fund, these results suggest that the unemployed would prefer to actively seek to support themselves financially rather than relying on handouts or benefits which might undermine self-esteem.

**Self-help Schemes**

Noteworthy is that support for mutual aid and self-help groups is considered an important role for trade unions by both trade union members and the unemployed. In fact, the unemployed believe that trade unions are better placed than other agents to promote self-help groups among the unemployed.

The unemployment surveys revealed that the best adjusted were either persons who were optimistic regarding their job prospects or those who were opting for the self-employment route and seeking to become financially self-supporting, at least as a temporary measure. Women appeared to be more adept at taking the self-help route; male breadwinners were most at risk of suffering from loss of self-esteem in unemployment. Although the unemployed persons participating in the study showed admirable courage when they tried to cope in spite of all odds, there was an obvious need for external assistance.

The unemployed recommended a catalyst role for trade unions. First wave respondents commented favourably on the superior organisational skills of trade unions which could be used to mobilise self-help groups among the unemployed. Trade unions could assist with venues and bulk buying of materials for co-operative efforts of the unemployed.

In some urban areas where self-help groups were already flourishing there was a tendency to resent union interference. It was recommended that trade unions tread lightly and not overrun the fragile organisational structures emergent among the unemployed. Successful self-help groups might prefer to operate independently but with the blessing and backing of trade unions. This outlook is reflected in a number of statements made by survey respondents:

- 'We do not want the trade unions to do things for us.'
- 'Trade unions should encourage small self-help projects that have started all over Soweto. They should be encouraged and given more working materials and nothing more.'
- 'Trade unions are us working people who come together and look at our problems. Trade unions should just bring us together and we could take it from there.'

In other areas where the unemployed were dispersed, respondents stated they would welcome guidance and material support from trade unions.

**The UIF Maze**

A spokesperson for the National Unemployed Workers’ Co-ordinating Committee (NUWCC) believes that a union for the jobless can play a role in guiding the unemployed through the jungle of the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) legislation (Weekly Mail, 19-25/10/90).

The unemployment studies confirm the need for assistance in securing UIF benefits. Only one-third of former job holders among the unemployed interviewed during the second wave of research had ever received UIF benefits during their working careers.

Ignorance, fears and discontent appear to be widespread when it comes to collecting UIF benefits. Fourteen per cent of former job holders who were not receiving UIF benefits at the time of the survey, indicated that they did not know how to apply for UIF, a further 11 per cent did not apply for fear of jeopardising chances of finding another job, and another 8 per cent could not be bothered.

**Moral Support**

The victims of unemployment may be the unsung heroes of the struggle to end apartheid. They suffer not only from material deprivation but also from a loss of prestige and identity. There is a danger of unemployed workers becoming isolated from the mainstream of society. Perhaps one of the most important effects of trade union intervention may be to restore the self-esteem of the retrenched and to return former trade union members to the fold.

The unemployment studies revealed that apart from economic hardship, another serious problem for the unemployed is their sense of rejection by the employed. Signs of isolation and marginalisation were detected among half of the unemployed polled during the second wave of research in 1989:

- 63% felt ashamed to be unemployed;
- 55% felt employed people did not care about unemployed people;
- 47% felt that only employed persons are respected;
- 46% felt other people avoided them in the streets.

There is evidence to suggest that some unemployed persons also felt betrayed by their trade unions. Only one in three former trade union
members participating in the second wave of research stated that their unions had backed them up after they had lost their jobs. In some cases former union members felt they had received too little recognition for their role in the struggle to end apartheid.

In order to effectively assist the unemployed, trade unions will have to address the identity crisis of the jobless. Retrenched workers do not wish to identify with the ranks of the unemployed. Their aim is to escape from unemployment and underemployment into a regular job or to overcome unemployment by turning to self-help work or regular self-employment. The first challenge for the newly formed trade union for the unemployed will be to find an appropriate name for itself which spells hope rather than gloom.

The New Divide

There are telling signs that the new divide in South Africa in the 1990s will be between persons in jobs and those out of work. Trade unions are ideally placed to bridge the gap between the newly defined ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’.

In the 1990s, employed people represented by the trade unions make up the mainstream. Unionising the unemployed either as individuals or through their self-help groups may provide a unique opportunity to bring the people dispossessed of their jobs back into the mainstream. There may be a case for seeking to minimise the distinction between union members in and out of work in the interests of worker solidarity.

The possible routes taken to engage the unemployed are manifold. Research has identified at least ten possible channels of assistance which would be welcomed in black communities and by the unemployed themselves (see data base). The appropriate mix of strategies of assistance will need to be sensitive to regional needs which vary according to the local composition of the unemployed and the social climate in the area.

During the 1980s the trade unions made enormous gains in empowering the mass of black workers. At the beginning of the 1990s there is a danger that mass unemployment may erode the progress made during the last decade by leaving behind the retrenched and the youthful work seekers.

The decision to welcome the unemployed back to the fold is a welcome gesture of recognition on the part of trade unions of the role played by the victims of unemployment in the struggle to end apartheid. Trade union support may go a long way to restoring first class citizenship to the ranks of the unemployed, replacing their lost identity, and empowering them to take their rightful place in the new South Africa.

STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

IPSA RESEARCH

The organisation of the unemployed has gained prominence in the context of economic recession, retrenchment and the resultant loss of union membership. With the consolidation by industrial sector of workers employed in the formal sector well underway, the spotlight has fallen on groups excluded from the LRA’s ambit such as farmworkers, domestic workers and the unemployed. These initiatives, however, have not solely emanated from the unions, but from the unemployed themselves as they seek new ‘strategies for survival’.

BACKGROUND

By January 1986, no less than three umbrella organisations of the unemployed existed nationally. These included:

- Unemployed Workers Coordinating Committee (UWCC), a coordinating body of various unemployed groups in the Transvaal.
- The Unemployed Workers Movement, comprising action committees in the various townships in the Western Cape.
- The East London Unemployed Workers Union, which coordinates its activities in East London and the surrounding rural areas.

In addition, retrenched workers from specific industries also constituted themselves into organised structures. At the second national conference of the national UWCC this year, 70 delegates were present representing eight regional unemployed structures.

FORMATION

Between 9-10 January 1987 these organisations met nationally to constitute the National Unemployed Workers Coordinating Committee, whose task was to set up an employed workers union. Closely resembling community structures rather than unions, the NUWCC was based on township structures rather than shop floor structures. A fee of between 20c-50c would be payable as dues. Set up by Cosatu, the project receives much support from the federation. However, the strongly favoured affiliation of the NUWCC to Cosatu may ironically come to outnumber the labour federation’s present membership. More than ‘20 million South Africans may be out of work’ (Weekly Mail, 19-25/10/90), of whom a substantial section would probably be attracted to the NUWCC.

ACTIVITIES

Some of the regional organisations for the unemployed have been in existence since 1985. Their activities included setting up co-operatives and related projects, running advice offices, initiating campaigns around jobs, UIF, overtime bans, support work for strikers, worker education and training. As importantly, these groups addressed struggles around general community issues.

The NUWCC is specifically concerned with reconciling the conflict of interests between the unemployed and organised workers. It has forged strong links with the trade unions, to reduce the prospects of the unemployed taking over strikers’ jobs and undermining strike action by organised labour through ‘scabbing’. Members of the NUWCC are also represented on Cosatu locals.

Tense industrial relations in the 1980s led to many wild cat strikes and mass dismissals. The union response has been swift in some instances and led to the creation of worker co-operatives, many being successful ventures that continue to the present. The following co-operatives are notable initiatives to create work opportunities for the unemployed:

- Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (Sawco)
- Zenzelani Cooperative

Following the longest dispute in the country which saw the mass dismissal of workers by the British firm, BTR Sarmcol, Sawco was formed by the Chemical Workers Industrial Union. A co-operative specialising in printing t-shirts for political and community organisations, the work of SAWCO was popularised through its play, The Long March, which played out the strike itself.

- Zenzelani Cooperative:

Set up by the SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu) for workers retrenched from the textile industry, the Zenzelani Cooperative has two branches in Durban. A successful textile co-operative, it has the sole contract for all ANC clothing and accessories in the region.

Beside the co-operatives, unemployed workers continue to organise themselves into structures. The Unemployment Silent Majority Organisation, (UMSO), with a membership of about 500 jobless workers was recently formed in Pietermaritzburg (Natal Witness Echo, 22/11/90). Interestingly, it intends to march to the prisons to secure food and shelter for the unemployed. The organisation includes in its agenda specific issues related to the unemployed as well as broader national issues such as Group Areas and sanctions.