



SAMWU - fading firebrand union?

This month, local government's largest trade union, the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu), turned 30, celebrating its founding last week in Polokwane (www.samwu.org.za). The union also commenced negotiating salary packages with employer body, Salga, this month and is likely to continue being a newsmaker in the months to come, but what is the state of the trade union after several rocky years?

More a trade union than a political force?

Samwu has been a fixed feature of the post-democratic political landscape - militantly opposed to privatisation (see its most recent comments on privatising SAA, citizen.co.za) and aggressive in its bargaining position (most recently seen in demands for a 15% salary hike along with a housing allowance and other conditions, see www.samwu.org.za, www.iol.co.za), it is also associated with disruptive and messy strikes by its members (see for instance www.iol.co.za).

Samwu has been critical of a number of mismanaged municipalities (often raising alarm bells when salaries go unpaid) and to this extent, had exercised admirable independence from the ruling alliance in protecting its members' interests. Last month, Samwu released scathing commentary on the prospects of water throttling (www.timeslive.co.za), weighing in on the interests of poor South Africans in the tradition of a workerist organisation.

But the union has been badly hurt by a number of scandals over the past decade that prompted an investigation by the Hawks (www.businesslive.co.za). Questionable financial management in recent years has undoubtedly tarnished the union's reputation, with some members asking for their fees to be withheld given factional battles within the organisations (www.iol.co.za).

As a result, Samwu is no longer the vocal force in national policy debates (to the extent that they take place) that it was 15 to 20 years ago. Arguably this is also true of umbrella federation Cosatu and need not necessarily be a cause for concern if Samwu hones in on its role of employee representation and if members accept its legitimacy.

With many South African unions facing uncertain times, there may well be a remoulding of the organisation in years to come as it forges into a new future - the challenge is ultimately one of survival.

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