

The taxi industry

organising strategies

by SAMUEL DENGA

The minibus taxi industry poses particular challenges to unions organising in the sector.

Love them or hate them, call them 'Skorokoros' or 'Zola Budds', millions of South Africans are forced to use minibus taxis daily.

The taxi industry is the main mode of public transport in South Africa. Sixty percent of commuters in cities, towns and rural areas use taxis daily. The industry provides direct employment to approximately 150 000 people. These include taxi drivers, marshals and other employees such as the administrators of taxi associations.

Taxi drivers suffer a high level of violence, intimidation and harassment, making this a very difficult sector to organise. While there are a number of small, independent unions operating in the industry, SATAWU, a COSATU affiliate, is the only one which is registered. At this point in time, it has 15 000 members in the taxi industry. SATAWU started recruiting and organising drivers in 1994.

Working conditions

Working conditions are very poor. Often, taxi drivers have no formal employment contract. Instead, there is a loose, verbal agreement with the taxi owner.

Salaries are very low and often linked to a target system. Drivers are paid according to the number of trips they make. This method of payment has a negative effect on safety standards. Many taxi drivers drive very fast, work long

hours and overload their taxis in order to reach their allotted target, leading to fatigue and accidents.

Benefits are few. No money is set aside for retrenchment packages. Most drivers are not entitled to annual or sick leave. They only receive leave, often unpaid, when their taxis are broken. Pension and medical aid are virtually unheard of and they are not registered for unemployment insurance.

One of the many obstacles to unionisation is the number of taxi operators and taxi associations. This makes negotiations extremely difficult. The government is trying to facilitate the formation of one taxi body, which will represent all the taxi operators. Regulation of the sector is also on the cards.

Organising strategies

SATAWU launched a new recruitment campaign in September last year. All the union's regional offices supported the campaign. This led to an increase in membership in the taxi industry from 7 000 to 15 000.

Unionisation is the best way to ensure decent working conditions for taxi employees.

Normally, taxi drivers pay their subscriptions in cash to shopstewards, who pass them to organisers. According to the SATAWU Taxi Organiser, membership offers the following benefits:

- protection against unfair labour practices (intimidation,

harassment, low wages);

- representation at the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA); and
- training under the Transport and Education Training Authority (TETA).

But another unionist pointed out that it is very difficult to service taxi drivers, because they are always on the road.

Recapitalisation

The taxi industry restructuring process is a response to the crisis created by the apartheid regime, which led to the deregulation of the minibus taxi industry. In an attempt to solve these problems, the government has introduced a strategy called 'taxi recapitalisation'. This process will get rid of taxis which were acquired illegally and will help to solve the problem of safety by replacing unroadworthy taxis. The government wants to introduce a public transport system which is efficient and regulated. This should go some way towards ensuring adherence to

labour laws. However unionisation is still the best way to ensure decent working conditions for taxi employees.

[Samuel Denga is the Programme Co-ordinator, Union Organisation, at NALEDI]