

Challenges Facing the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union in 1995.

Marks, M. (1995). Challenges Facing the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union in 1995. Paper presented at Popcru Congress, June.

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There are a number of issues I would like to pick up on, most of which have come to mind in the duration of your congress. While I believe that POPCRU has played a crucial role in terms of creating a new image for the police service, and providing a forum for collectivising grievances and concerns, there are a number of challenges that I believe you are still to confront in order to serve your members to the fullest.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

In your paper for discussion in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), you state that POPCRU strongly supports the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and views it as essential in terms of a healing process in our country. I am very pleased to see that your union has taken such a progressive and open view in this regard. Your sentiments that public hearings should be held is representative of the majority of South African people. As POPCRU you can begin by insisting that public hearings be conducted. Your collective voice as workers in the police and correctional services is crucial to this process.

Furthermore, as you sit here as members of a human rights union, many of you have in the past been involved in gross violations of human rights. As members of the South African Police force in the decades of apartheid governance, you received commands from a racist and unjust authority. I am aware that a number of you here today have in the past been part of the security branch and as a result are implicated in acts of torture and enforced detention without trial. By joining POPCRU you have publicly taken a stand against such practices, and your current and future role is to ensure that these activities never happen again in our country. POPCRU members must not only as a collective condone the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. You must also where necessary, testify openly before the commission setting an example to other members of the police service and the South African community at large. You also have a key role in informing fellow colleagues as to the importance and nature of the commission. The Truth Commission has the potential of being a vehicle through which you can cleanse the system and facilitate your move toward proper community policing. Furthermore, by providing evidence or giving testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as individuals you may derive a huge sense of psychological relief.

I am also aware that many of you are also victims of the apartheid system. As citizens of South Africa, you too have a right to give evidence against those police and prisons people

who have in the past caused great pain and loss in your own personal lives. As POPCRU members you have been dismissed from the service and served prison sentences as a result of your stand against the apartheid system. It should become common knowledge that there were "good" police people who were supporters of the anti-apartheid movement during very difficult and trying times. Your contribution needs to be noted and acknowledged.

Community Policing

During this congress you have stated that "POPCRU initiated the concept of community policing". This may be the case. You have also stated that management have "hijacked" the concept of community policing. It is not possible for anybody to "hijack" community policing. Community policing is about an attitude to policing. It is a manner of policing which involves positive working relationships between the police and the community. It is about creating a police service which is accountable to the communities which you serve. Community policing is a method of policing through which the community and the police work together to create an environment which is safe and secure for all who live in South Africa. In your daily work you can build trusting relationships with the communities in which you work and set an example to other police people which demonstrates that the police are acting in the interest of all South Africans.

Secondly, it is your right and duty to ensure that community police forums are initiated and sustained. While it may be true that high ranking police people have been made community police officers, you have every prerogative to attend forums as members of the police service. As participants in these forums you should be assisting in ensuring that communities are properly represented and that agreements made in these forums are carried out by the police service. You can also play a role in monitoring and evaluating these forums in the areas in which you work and live.

It is true that in some areas community police officers are of high ranking and have been members of the security branch. It is also true that many of these officers do not report back to their stations as to the decisions taken in the forums; this leads to enormous resentment and frustration for people attending such forums. But, community police forums have the right to demand that a given officer be replaced by someone else. As POPCRU, you can assist with finding out the problems that exist in forums and ensure that appropriate police officers are attending and responsible for these forums.

POPCRU itself needs to hold internal workshops with its members as to what exactly community policing is, and the powers and constraints of community police forums. It is only once POPCRU members have this basic understanding that you can contribute positively to this new mode of policing in South Africa. It should be noted by your union that community policing is not a "soft option"; it is difficult for the police to change their style and operation, and equally difficult for many communities to develop real trust in the South African Police

Service. However, you should be educating other police people and members of the community as to the importance of community policing.

Capacity Building within the Union

POPCRU has essentially portrayed itself as a civil rights union. In your Secretariat Report it is stated that "POPCRU was established with the sole purpose of promoting stability, unity, impartiality and furthermore to recognise the civil and basic human rights of all South Africans and all people who live in it". The role that your union has played is courageous, timely and significant. POPCRU indicated to South Africans and the rest of the world that there are police and prison workers opposed to ensuring that an unjust and inhumane system is enforced. You have also created a forum where many police people (particularly of lower ranks) are able to come together and present a collective voice. Your union is also significant being the first real police union in South Africa.

While acknowledging the important role your union has played, there are a number of concerns I would like to raise which have emerged through my contact with the union in the past few months, and currently at your congress. To be frank, your union focuses too heavily upon human rights. While this is an excellent principal which underpins all your thought and activity, it is simply not an adequate focus for any union. Your union needs to build its capacity as an organisation that should effectively carry out collective bargaining for its members. In this regard, your union needs to become more professional – correspondence need to be answered, phones should be accessible, meetings should be attended on time, and proper strategic planning should be executed. Furthermore, POPCRU needs to skill its members (particularly its leadership) in collective bargaining skills and the organisational skills required for a union to function. It would be extremely useful if POPCRU asked for assistance from COSATU in this regard. There are also a number of members of parliament who are supposedly representing the trade union movement. Some of these individuals are from the public sector itself. Your union, as central to maintaining law and order in South Africa, should request, even demand, assistance from these parliamentarians who for the most part are extremely skilled unionists.

I have heard mention in this congress of employing researchers and legal advisors, but no mention of employing someone with union skills. This I believe is short sighted. Nobody in your union is a skilled unionist who is able to deal with shop-floor issues. This may not be a fault of yourselves since your skill lies in the areas of safety and security. None-the-less, a union cannot function without the basic skills needed to ensure that the needs of your worker base are addressed. It is crucial that key representatives of your union at all levels be skilled in negotiating, reporting back, and mandating. At present, a few national leaders have some industrial based skills in this union. However, they seem not to be sharing these with others, and are definitely not accounting adequately for key decisions taken and meetings held with other stakeholder. This needs to be addressed with immediate effect.

At present your union is counting on the support of the national minister. While Mr Mufamadi may sympathise with the demands of your union, he is not necessarily the correct person to be dealing with regarding questions of labour relations. You should also keep in mind that the next Minister of Safety and Security may be less sensitive to your union. With regards the basic working conditions of your members, such as wages, key decision making power in fact lies with the Public Service Commission (PSC). Your union should be debating the role of this department, and how you will be able to effectively bargain with the PSC, accepting the fact that your members are only one part of workers in the public sector itself.

I am astounded that your union has not focused more in this congress on substantial issues which concern labour relations. In your report back from the commission on labour relations, you glibly conclude that at present you should not contest the fact that you have been excluded from the proposed Labour Relations Bill. Your exclusion from this bill is significant, and to date no adequate explanation has been provided for your exclusion. The Labour Relations Bill has the potential to bind both the police unions and management to proper negotiating forums, as well as allow for the creation of workplace forums which could take place at station level. Your exclusion from the bill, I believe, needs to be addressed more substantially, possibly with assistance from other more established public sector unions. Furthermore, I would have thought that at this congress you would have developed a proper working definition of "essential services" within both the police and correctional services. Such a definition could greatly assist you in coming to terms with appropriate and acceptable mechanisms of collective bargaining.

Finally, there has been some discussion in the national leadership regarding the potential for creating a separate bargaining chamber for the police within the public sector. This is a crucial point of discussion given the fact that at present both major police unions have only observer status in the Public Sector Labour Relations Council. A separate chamber could at least provide a starting point for police to assert their "special" needs and functions within the public sector and provide a proper forum for negotiation and collective bargaining. This too has not been given any serious consideration in your congress. Surely this is a key concern for your union and its members. I would like to reiterate that there needs to be some discussion as to your relationship with your prime employer, the Public Service Commission. You need to decide whether this structure acts to your advantage or to your disadvantage. These are complicated issues with which again you will need assistance from labour experts and trade unionists organising in public sector.

Relationships with Other Unions

Since the conception of POPCRU there has been talk of an affiliation to COSATU. Again most of the discussion regarding this important decision has taken place amongst your national leadership, in particular in the NEC. An affiliation to a federation such as COSATU would have a number of important consequences for your union. Such an affiliation would provide your union with a number of resources and increase your bargaining power.

COSATU unionists could assist with the building of your union, particularly with regard to industry based concerns.

However, COSATU in principal believes that there should be one union in one industry. Their reason for this is simple. Workers united in any industry are far better placed in terms of any negotiations that take place. At present POPCRU has a relatively acrimonious relationship with the other major police union, the South African Police Union (SAPU). While it is common knowledge that SAPU has a dubious history, the two unions are drawing membership from the same base. This causes conflict between police workers, particularly at the local level. Furthermore, in the national negotiations forum, SAPU and POPCRU stand united on most issues which relate to working conditions.

It is high time that the two unions consider a merger process. This will involve a lot of pain and discomfort for both unions. Both unions will have to make concessions and a merger process will have to be carefully negotiated and mediated. POPCRU needs to examine what they can gain from a merger process with SAPU. Some of these gains include professionalism, good contacts with management, and an increased social base. Of course, POPCRU too has a number of significant contributions to make in a merger process. These include legitimacy, a representative membership, popularity, and also funding.

Elements of both unions will resist such a merger. However, an affiliation to COSATU will no doubt force POPCRU to work in a more constructive manner with SAPU, who should be viewed as a sister union and not the "enemy". Much of the discussion in this congress has been about how to mobilise and organise in a manner which will outdo SAPU. Your energies would be far better placed if you thought about how as police workers, you could develop a strong union with proper capacity to deal with working conditions; this should be the prime concern of any industrial union whether based in the private or public sector.

Conclusion

My input here today has been rather critical of your union. I would like to state that the Policing Research Project supports the endeavours of POPCRU. We regard your union in high esteem and believe that you are on the correct track to becoming a more forceful and consolidated organisation. The fact that you have been able to openly identify many of the strengths, weaknesses and challenges facing your union is very promising. The Policing Research Project hopes to continue its positive working relationship with your union, and are willing to facilitate wherever possible with the key challenges that confront you in the future. We would like to wish you all of the very best for all that lies ahead, and congratulate you on your past and present achievements.