

# FROM MWU TO SOLIDARITY – A TRADE UNION REINVENTING ITSELF\*

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## Abstract

*As South Africa's most prominent white trade union of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Mine Workers' Union became renowned for defending white job reservation in the mining industry. After 1948 it enjoyed the NP government's support in this regard. Skilled labour shortages and changing labour conditions in the 1970s forced the government to introduce labour reform. Job reservation was scrapped and black unions were officially recognised, as recommended by the Wiehahn Commission. These initiatives put the MWU on a confrontational path with the government and the union aligned itself with right-wing political resistance and protest. However, the altered political and economic South African realities after 1994 forced the MWU to rethink its vision, strategies and structures. By 2002 it had reinvented and transformed itself into Solidarity, adequately equipped and geared for addressing the labour challenges and demands of a post-apartheid South Africa.*

## 1. Introduction and theoretical framework

This article is an abridged version of a comprehensive research project into the history of the South African Mine Workers' Union covering one hundred years of the union's history. The project, entitled "Van MWU tot Solidariteit – 'n Geskiedenis van die Mynwerkersunie, 1902-2000", is due to be published in Afrikaans and English in the course of 2007. Up to now, no complete study on the history, role and influence of the Mine Workers' Union in South African society have been published and the project, an initiative by the author, is an effort to fill this lacuna in South African historiography. After reading a press release in 2001, that the union would change its name to MWU-Solidarity, the author approached the union's general secretary, Flip Buys, with the intention to write the its history. An agreement was reached with the union's executive that the author would have free access to any MWU archival records but would maintain complete editorial independence throughout the writing and publishing process.

The Mine Workers' Union can, in all probability, be regarded as the most renowned white labour union in South Africa during the apartheid era. Its history and actions were influenced in an important way by the course of South African politics and economics during the twentieth century. Against this background this article examines the rocky road of labour relations between the MWU and mining capital and the state. These relations

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oscillated between militant industrial clashes involving labour, state and capital, intimate involvement with the Afrikaner labour movement and politics, and an embittered alienation from the NP government which would eventually drive the MWU into the fold of right-wing politics. For most of its history, and especially during the more turbulent times, its members could rely on bold leadership to steer the union successfully through periods of crisis. The MWU's ability to adapt to changing labour circumstances is a key feature of its survival for more than one hundred years. The article analyses the circumstances which led to crisis in the union's existence towards the end of the 1990s and which forced a complete restructuring and reinvention of its strategies in order to survive in a post-apartheid South Africa. In addition, the successes of the restructuring initiatives that were introduced by the union's executive are being investigated.

## **2. Militant beginnings**

Originally founded on 22 June 1902 in Johannesburg as the Transvaal Miners' Association, or TMA (Ticktin 1973: 113-114), this union became prominent for its militant stance in the great industrial strikes, during the first two decades of the Union of South Africa. After the 1913 strike, the TMA was renamed the (South African) Mine Workers' Union (MWU) (Gitsham & Trembath 1926: 28,66; Cope 1943: 89,110-111; Walker & Weinbren 1961: 22,42; Katz 1976: 152,226,252). The year 1922 saw the biggest and bloodiest industrial upheaval in South African labour history with the three month strike eventually suppressed by government forces. The MWU played a pivotal role in the so-called Rand Revolt, for its defense of the preservation of white job reservation and the colour bar in the goldmines of the Witwatersrand (Oberholster 1982: 56-191; Urquhart 1922: 33,74-96).

A political consequence of the miners' defeat during the 1922 strike was the fall of the Smuts government in the 1924 general election – the latter being held responsible for the violent suppression of the strike. In its place a coalition government, consisting of the National Party (NP) and the South African Labour Party (SALP), came into power and introduced a programme of protective pro-white, or "civilized", labour legislation. The introduction of the Mines and Works Amendment Act (the so-called "Colour Bar" Act) in 1926 was of particular benefit to members of the MWU to the extent that it entrenched white job reservation on the mines. The law protected skilled and semi-skilled white workers by simply reserving the granting of certificates of competency in skilled trades to whites and Coloureds and excluding blacks and Asians (Brits 1993: 154-155,173-175,180-182; Johnstone 1976: 150,156,166-167). Therefore the post-1922 period saw the incorporation, institutionalization and bureaucratization of white trade unions within the state structures, thus disarming them as a potential militant, political threat. Within the union structures power passed more into the hands of a bureaucracy of permanent and salaried trade union officials (Davies 1979: 179-181,195-198,231).

According to Yudelman (1983: 9,114-115,186,208-211,221-233), the state embarked upon a programme to subjugate and pacify organized white labour

by formally co-opting it into the structures of the state. Thus organised white labour lost its power to use strikes as an effective political and economic weapon, having been depoliticized by means of incorporation into the political and administrative structures of the state. This was indeed a trade off – white labour accepted collective bargaining and the civilized labour policy in exchange for compliance with state-controlled labour structures. The increased role of the state brought a virtual end to militant white worker resistance and for the next five decades or so the MWU would become a docile, pro-government union.

### **3. The MWU between 1924 and 1979**

The 1930s and 1940s are regarded by many historians as the height of Afrikaner nationalism. In this period the MWU became embroiled in the intense and sometimes fierce struggle for political hegemony between DF Malan's NP and Smuts' newly-found United Party (UP). For the Afrikaner political and cultural leaders within the NP, as well as the UP with its SALP ally, the densely populated mining constituencies of the Witwatersrand became crucial battlegrounds in general elections. By 1936, for instance, Afrikaners constituted 90% of the MWU's 12 000 members, but they had virtually no representation on the union's executive and therefore no say in running its affairs. Concomitantly, therefore, with the battle for political power in the public domain, a bitter and protracted struggle waged for twelve years between Afrikaner nationalists in the NP and their foes in the UP-SALP alliance for political control of the MWU.

In their efforts to gain trade union control over the white miners, Afrikaner cultural leaders such as Dr Albert Hertzog initially tried to establish the Afrikaner Bond van Mynwerkers (ABM) to counter the UP-SALP-controlled MWU and to coax its members away. However, these efforts were thwarted by the Chamber of Mines' refusal to recognize the ABM, after which Afrikaner nationalists focused on a strategy to take over and Afrikanerise the MWU executive. Allegations of fraud, corruption and mismanagement of the union's assets by its pro-UP-SALP executive, resulting in commissions of enquiry into the MWU's affairs, two strikes and various court cases also contributed towards convincing its members that a change in management had become necessary. In the 1948 general election six mining constituencies indeed played a decisive role in bringing the NP to power. And in November 1948, six months after the NP came to power, a new NP-orientated MWU executive was also elected (see Naudé 1969 and De Kock 1983).

From 1948 to the late 1970s the pro-NP executive of the MWU maintained a symbiotic and fairly harmonious relationship with the NP government. As one of its most important constituencies, the NP government had the interests of the unskilled and semi-skilled white working class at heart. As in 1924, the MWU's interests were promoted and entrenched by protectionist legislation. In addition, Daan Ellis, the newly-elected general secretary of the MWU, was a self-proclaimed NP supporter and a member of the party's executive in the Transvaal. He had instant and unrivalled access to ministerial - and even the Prime Minister's - offices and maintained a benevolent and friendly

relationship with the Minister of Mines at the time, Dr AJR van Rhyn. A parliamentary mine study group was also formed by MP's from NP-controlled mining constituencies on the Witwatersrand, which served as a lobby for white miners' interests with regard to legislation. The close relationship between the MWU and the party probably culminated in the NP caucus's nomination of Faas de Wet for Senator in 1955. De Wet was the MWU's welfare officer and also a member of the NP's Transvaal executive (Giliomee & Adam 1981: 123,143; Lang 1986: 317,378).

The close relationship that existed between the MWU and the NP once Ellis became the union's general secretary would last until the late 1970s. Between 1948 and 1978 it was not necessary for white unions such as the MWU to exercise political pressure in order to promote their interests. Their aims could be achieved through party political channels. The NP's party system provided sufficient conduits through which representations by trade union leaders could be made to the government. As was mentioned before, the executive of the Transvaal NP, in particular, reserved positions for MWU representatives such as Faas de Wet. Between 1956 and 1979 labour policy matters were cleared in all cases with the MWU before implementation. In terms of labour policy, therefore, the MWU enjoyed not only protection from the state, but also wielded powerful influence (Giliomee & Adam 1981: 202; Barnard 1991: 30).

The NP government, however, eventually began to shift its stance on economic policy, which would in future differ considerably from that of previous decades. From the 1960s to the mid-1970s the government, in its implementation of the policy of apartheid, attempted to restrict the economic mobility of blacks in white South Africa by forcing them to fulfil their aspirations in Bantustans. Simultaneously, the government was forced to take cognizance of changing economic conditions. As the gold price and gold production were on the rise, government revenue from gold and the mining industry remained a crucial source of income in foreign exchange. Therefore, in the face of threatening economic isolation and sanctions by the international community in response to South Africa's apartheid policy, the importance of mining and business interests, as important sources of state revenue, increased accordingly. From the early 1970s the NP government began to take cognizance of the interests of the private sector and its need for a stable labour force. Initially the attitude of BJ Vorster's cabinet was that black workers could only be promoted in the labour hierarchy with the consent of white unions. In the light of the changing economic priorities, however, the state gradually began to remove the restrictions on black labour. Blacks were also provided with better training facilities, as the shortage of skilled labour made the provision of black job opportunities a priority. Consequently, white job protection would be curtailed. This in turn generated greater tensions within the ranks of white trade unions, especially the MWU (Giliomee & Adam 1981: 135-136,143,151,202; Houghton 1978: 102,108-113,228-230).

#### **4. The recommendations of the Wiehahn Commission and the consequences for white labour**

What can be regarded as a watershed event in the history of the black labour movement, which also heralded the renaissance of black trade union organization in South Africa, was the mass Durban strikes of 1973. These widespread strikes over low wages, mounting unemployment and poverty involved an estimated 60 000 to 100 000 black employees. Industry was disrupted. The institutionalized racial separatism entrenched in labour structures and the waves of strike action in 1973 prepared the ground for the unprecedented growth of a new brand of trade unionism in the history of the South African labour movement. The work stoppages signalled the start of the evolution of a profound consciousness of power among the black working masses (Van Niekerk 1988: 154; MacShane 1984: 16-17,20-23; Finnemore 1998: 29; Bendix 1989: 300; Ncube 1985: 114,143; Luckhardt and Wall 1980: 447-453).

By 1976 it had become obvious that the government had not solved the problem of black worker militancy. Pressured by the political consequences of the 1976 Soweto student uprisings, combined with the threat of sanctions and disinvestment, the government in 1977 appointed a commission of enquiry into labour legislation, commonly known as the Wiehahn Commission. The most outstanding recommendations which the government accepted and implemented were, among others, the registration of black trade unions and the abolition of statutory job reservation (Wiehahn 1983: 186-189; MacShane 1984: 55-56; Bendix 1989: 302-307).

Having enjoyed state protection for such a long time, members of the MWU were totally unprepared for socio-economic reforms and black advancement, which they regarded as a direct threat to their position. White workers resented the desegregation of public amenities on the mines as well as the possibility of working under black supervision. There were also fears of being replaced by black miners or that their wage levels could be undercut by cheaper black labour. At the same time the number of white workers dwindled in relation to the South African labour force as a whole and therefore also their scarcity value as skilled labour decreased. Their industrial and political power to influence labour legislation and policy diminished accordingly (Van Rooyen 1994: 31). According to Barnard (1991: 35), the appointment of the Wiehahn Commission, and the government's subsequent acceptance of its recommendations, were the most important factors in the eventual rupture of the ties between the MWU and the NP. Whereas the previous militant clashes between the state and the union ended in bloody violence and the loss of life, the MWU of the late 1970s resorted to confrontational political resistance and protest in its disputes with the NP government.

Personality clashes played an important role in the breakdown of the relationship between white mining labour and the government. During Fanie Botha's term of office as Minister of Labour (later renamed Minister of Manpower) the previously cordial relations between the Department of Labour and the MWU degenerated to a level of mutual distrust. Between Botha and Arrie Paulus, Gründling's successor as MWU general secretary, there was a feeling of mutual aversion (Barnard 1991: 32,34,114). As far as Paulus was

concerned, the status quo of the Mines and Works Act with regard to job reservation should remain unaltered, as it was perceived to be the only protection for the white labour minority against “black oppression”. As “foreigners” in white South Africa, they could not claim trade union recognition, but should exercise their labour and political rights in the Bantustans. Paulus predicted that, if blacks were appointed over MWU members in the mining industry, South Africa “would know no industrial peace” and that such advancement of black labourers would lead to “friction and labour unrest” (Jacobsz 1980: 10,12-13,20; Barnard 1991: 47,79).

The MWU threw down the gauntlet on the eve of the release of Part 1 of the Wiehahn recommendations when a strike by union members broke out on an obscure copper mine in O’Okiep, Namaqualand. The strike, which commenced on 5 March 1979, was organized to oppose the appointment of three Coloured artisans in jobs reserved for whites under the mining regulations of the Mines and Works Act. It soon escalated into a nationwide strike involving 9 000 white miners on 70 mines. The strike, however, collapsed after a week, when the Chamber of Mines threatened that the temporarily suspension of the strikers would become permanent, with the loss of all benefits (Cooper 1979: 4,6-18,21-23,25; Friedman 1987: 164-165,177; Barnard 1991: 79,83-84,114,117; Lang 1986: 469). According to Cooper (1979: 2,4,17-18,20-25), the 1979 strike served as a warning to the government not to tamper with mining regulations regarding job reservation in its zeal to introduce labour reform. The MWU also tried to demonstrate that the white miners were indispensable in the mining industry and that production would be seriously affected without them. The 1979 strike was the last desperate but futile attempt by white miners to thwart labour reform and to preserve a labour dispensation based on apartheid legislation.

Although the gist of the recommendations of Part 1 of the Wiehahn Commission was anticipated by the MWU, its endorsement by the government still came as a shock. Suddenly white workers would no longer be able to rely on state protection of their jobs (Giliomee & Adam 1981: 203; Lipton 1989: 322). Spokespersons of the MWU vilified and lambasted the Wiehahn report. For Paulus it meant “suicide” for the white worker and he regarded the recommendations as “the greatest act of treason against the white workers of South Africa since 1922”. Fanie Botha, the Minister of Labour, was accused of breaking his promises to consult with white workers before considering any changes to labour legislation (Paulus 1979: 1-2). In his MWU presidential address of 1981 Cor de Jager reproached the NP for no longer being the same party which the miners had helped to bring to power in 1948. He also repeated the old MWU threat of another “1922 strike”, should the government tamper with the Mines and Works Act to force job integration upon white miners and to grant blasting tickets to blacks (MWU General Council Minutes 1981: 1-2,4,8-9).

Part 6 of the Wiehahn report was released in November 1980 and dealt specifically with legislation regarding labour relations in the mining industry. It confirmed the MWU’s “worst fears”, as De Jager put it. The term “scheduled person” in the wording of the 1965 Mines and Works Act was replaced with

“competent person”, thus implying that black miners would in future also be able to obtain blasting tickets (Wiehahn 1982: 740-765; Lang 1986: 471; Friedman 1987: 173). However, compared with its reaction to the release of Part 1 of the Wiehahn recommendations, the MWU’s response to Part 6 was surprisingly void of militant rhetoric. Paulus and De Jager repeated their old accusations that the NP was no friend of the white worker any longer and that it was willing to violate established labour policy to gain favour with “moneyed interests” and with blacks. This “sell-out” of white labour would “inevitably” lead to black demands for desegregated neighbourhoods, facilities and a one-man-one-vote franchise system (MWU General Council Minutes 1982: 2-3; Paulus 1981: 1; De Jager 1982: 1,3; Barnard 1991: 48-49). But despite the MWU’s lament that the Wiehahn recommendations abolished job reservation, Lipton (1989: 63,208), Lang (1986: 471), Friedman (1987: 167,173) and Hamilton (1977: 28,79) concur that, because of its pervasive influence in the mining industry and the government’s wariness of this situation, the union succeeded in keeping the colour bar intact on the mines until as late as 1987.

Seeing that the government could no longer be stopped from implementing the Wiehahn recommendations the MWU changed tactics in its persistent opposition to the encroachment on job reservation. Firstly, it decided to consolidate the ranks of white labour in order to resist the abolition of job reservation and to bargain for white workers’ rights more effectively. Therefore Paulus strove to create a “white force” or power base that could “fight” for the “survival” of the white worker. It would also serve as a strategy against the “threat” of “black advancement”. Thus a politically-conscious pressure group, or one advocating solidarity similar to the Polish example of 1980, was to be created which, at a later stage, could be transformed into a (white) workers’ party (MWU General Council Minutes 1979: 10,21; Barnard 1991: 45,49-50,52,58,66,115; Friedman 1987: 176).

But in its endeavours to build a white trade union alliance against a non-racial labour dispensation, the MWU made many enemies. Using the MWU’s official organ, Paulus made a distinction between conservative unions, which openly advocated white workers’ rights, and moderate unions. He severely criticized the moderate unions which signed the so-called SEIFSA agreement (Steel and Engineering Industries Federation of South Africa) as it was regarded as a method to circumvent the colour bar in the mining industry. Signatories to the SEIFSA agreement undertook to do away with discriminatory practices in favour of equal jobs and training for blacks. Paulus’s uncompromising stance even created dissension in the ranks of the South African Confederation of Labour Associations (SACLA), an all-white labour confederation of which the MWU was a member. Several SACLA member unions, such as the Metal Workers’ Union, dissociated themselves from Paulus’s views and supported the new labour legislation proposed by the Wiehahn commission. Paulus’s dissenting tactics eventually caused SACLA’s influence on the South African labour scene to wane almost to insignificance. Most moderate unions disaffiliated from SACLA in the early 1980s as a result of the dominant anti-black outlook that prevailed in the organization (Barnard 1991: 51-56,58-59, 63-64, 114-115; Lipton 1989: 198-199,205; Friedman 1987: 163,165-166,175).

In an effort to counter the influence of moderate white artisan unions in the mining industry and to lure their members away, the MWU began to expound the idea that, by opening their ranks to black workers, these unions “betrayed” the white worker. Therefore the MWU was the only trade union that truly catered for the interests of the white worker. In light of the Wiehahn recommendations that trade union registration should be liberalized, the MWU also attempted to extend its traditional scope beyond the mining industry. The union began to recruit steelworkers on Iscor plants and electricity workers on Escom power stations and coal mines. In its recruitment propaganda the MWU was portrayed as “a sanctuary for the white workers”. The scope of recruitment was eventually extended to include about 200 job categories in mining and other industries in the greater Gauteng region (MWU General Council Minutes 1979: 4; 1981: 12-13; 1983: 20; 1984: 22; Barnard 1991: 59-62, 64, 66; Friedman 1987: 176).

A second tactic that the MWU implemented in its strategy to oppose the encroachment upon job reservation was to align itself more closely with right-wing political parties such as Albert Hertzog’s Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) and, after 1982, with the Conservative Party (CP) of Dr Andries Treurnicht. According to Barnard (1991: 35,66), the political price the NP had to pay for introducing labour reform was the loss of political support from the MWU and the white worker. The character of the NP in the era of the Wiehahn commission was quite different from that of the “people’s party” in the 1940s, when party policy was defined by ordinary members at party congresses. In 1948 white working-class support was crucial in the NP’s election victory. But by the 1970s the party was controlled by an Afrikaner elite consisting of a growing urban, professional middle class, who were more concerned about their own material needs and comforts than altruistic people’s ideals and the necessity of sacrifice. As their identification with the Afrikaner people as an ethnic group began to weaken, their identification with a multiracial South African state began to grow. These factors contributed to the NP’s increasing estrangement from, and neglect of, its Afrikaner working-class base (Giliomee 2003: 544,598,607,609; O’Meara 1996: 165; Van Rooyen 1994: 30; Barnard 1991: 118).

Thus, after the release of the Wiehahn recommendations, the estrangement between the MWU and the NP government became complete and irreversible. Despite the political neutrality explicitly stipulated by its constitution, in practice the MWU gave moral and electoral support to the HNP in the by-elections of 1979 and the general election of 1981. Although the NP retained the mining seat of Randfontein in the by-election of 1979, the election results indicated a marked swing to the right in what was regarded as a strong anti-government protest vote against the Wiehahn recommendations (Barnard 1991: 65-66,78-80,92-94,114; Yudelman 1983: 269). In the mining constituency of Rustenburg, the home of MWU president Cor de Jager, the electoral swing towards the right was even more phenomenal and the NP only won the seat by a small majority of 846 votes over the HNP. And in the 1981 general election De Jager stood as HNP candidate in the mining constituency of Carletonville. The HNP vowed to protect the interests of the white worker

but, surprisingly, lost again to the NP due to internal strife and an ineffective election campaign and strategy (Barnard 1991: 98-100,104; Ries & Dommissie 1982: 83,96; Yudelman 1983: 264,269; O'Meara 1996: 165).

The clearest indication of the MWU's anti-government political position was the moral support the union's leadership gave to the CP since its founding in 1982. The CP was founded in reaction to the NP's liberal reformist policies with regard to the racial issue in South Africa. Soon after its inception Paulus indicated that the MWU agreed with Treurnicht's criticism of the "Botha-Wiehahn labour policy" and that they supported the CP leader's point of view. On the other hand, the union's attitude towards the NP chilled even further and turned to hostility (Ries & Dommissie 1982: 96,108-187; Barnard 1991: 118-119; MWU Executive Council Minutes 24.1.1983:2). Therefore it came as no surprise when Paulus was approached to contest the Carletonville seat for the CP in the general election of 1987. Although he won by a narrow margin of only 98 votes, this constituted a huge swing towards the right in mining constituencies as was the case in 1979 and 1981. Paulus succeeded in turning the NP's majority of 3 000 votes in the previous general election into a CP gain (MWU Executive Council Minutes 26.1.1987: 11; 26.6.1987: 13).

Peet Ungerer, Paulus's successor as MWU general secretary, shared his vision of consolidating white union labour in order to protect white workers more effectively from black encroachment. Ungerer, though, did not believe that the union should be positioned too closely to party politics. However, the MWU could not escape the South African political ferment on the late 1980s and early 1990s. Soon after Ungerer's appointment as general secretary in 1987, the Mines and Works Amendment Act (the actual implementation of Part 6 of the Wiehahn recommendations) was published in the *Government Gazette*. It signalled the final scrapping of job reservation in the mining industry and black miners could now enter job categories previously reserved for whites only. In the light of its history of threats and militant rhetoric to the effect that any attempt to abolish job reservation would have dire consequences for the mining industry, there were expectations in certain quarters that the union would revert to the strike weapon as it did in 1979. But in Ungerer's judgement, given the failure of the 1979 strike, a repetition of such tactics would be fatal. Without traditional government support the MWU found itself in a vulnerable position and a strike could jeopardize its very existence. Strike action would also serve no purpose as the Amendment Act had already been promulgated by parliament. The end of job reservation finally was a *fait accompli* (Ungerer 2001).

A political solution such as the 1924 general election, when white workers contributed to the fall of the Smuts government in retaliation for its bloody suppression of the 1922 strike, was not possible after 1987 in light of the altered labour situation and white political dissension. In addition, Ungerer correctly interpreted the political implications for white labour when President FW de Klerk announced in Parliament in 1990 the unbanning of all anti-apartheid political organizations and exiles, and the liberation of all political prisoners. A whites-only general election, in which workers could express a protest vote against the labour reforms that ended white labour security,

would never again take place in South Africa. Thus the MWU adapted its strategy again and would henceforth strive towards creating a “super white trade union”, as it was called. It was argued that in the absence of effective white political power under black majority rule after 1994 there should be at least one strong labour organization to cater for the political, economic and cultural needs of the Afrikaner working class and to enhance their bargaining power (Ungerer 1990: 1; Ungerer 2001).

In order to implement its adapted strategy, the MWU implemented a two-pronged approach. Firstly, the union initiated a vigorous recruitment drive to extend its scope to workers in the steel, chemical, distribution and other miscellaneous industries. On the one hand, the promotion of a super white union was met with great enthusiasm by white workers, especially in instances where their own unions became multi-racial. By 1992 the MWU’s membership had increased to 44 000 to make it the largest white trade union in South Africa and by 1994 had risen even further to 52 000 (see MWU General Council Minutes 1991, 1992; Buys 1992: 8; Buys 1994: 2). On the other hand, the MWU’s successful campaign to enlarge its membership caused friction and animosity with the Iron and Steel Union, which - as its biggest rival for new members - began to lose large numbers to the former (MWU Executive Council Minutes 27.11.1991: 12; 18.12.1991: 5).

The second leg of its new approach forced the MWU inevitably back into the fold of right-wing politics. In reaction to the defeat of the “no” vote campaign during the 1992 referendum, where the white electorate had to endorse or reject the NP’s policy of negotiating a new political dispensation with black liberation movements, the MWU, in conjunction with other right-wing organizations, decided on an all-embracing strategy of resistance and obstruction to any reform initiatives by the government. This strategy entailed non-violent mass mobilization, strikes and protests by white workers. Thus the focus shifted from efforts to halt reforms by bringing a right-wing government to power through electoral means, towards exercising pressure on the NP and the ANC to recognize Afrikaner claims to political self-determination and to pay attention to white worker grievances and interests. In 1993 the MWU was a founder member of the Afrikaner Volksfront (later renamed the Freedom Front). This organization aimed at forging right-wing movements together in an effective alliance to further the idea of an Afrikaner *volkstaat* (Van Rooyen 1994: 71-72,91,112-114,154-155,171-173,187-188,192-193).

From a perusal of the contents of *MWU News*, the union’s new official mouthpiece, it seems clear that in the realignment of its position towards right-wing protest movements, the MWU became more reactionary and adopted a laager mentality. It began to focus on right-wing Afrikaner causes such as Radio Pretoria, the protection of the Afrikaans language in the workplace and so-called *volkseie* (people’s own) schools and sports. *MWU News* also carried advertisements for right-wing business ventures. The desegregation of neighbourhoods and public facilities, as well as the implementation of affirmative action in the workplace was severely criticized. It was the intention of the MWU executive to rekindle a “culture of protest” amongst its members,

which was absent in white labour ranks in the post-apartheid political dispensation. MWU mass action, protest marches and strikes were launched against Telkom, Escom, Iscor and the mining industry on issues such as the withdrawal of certain workers' benefits as a result of affirmative action, wage demands, discrimination and violence against white workers, black advancement and the promotion of equal opportunities in the workplace (see MWU Executive Council Minutes 18.12.1995: 25; 26.6.1996: 30).

By 1997 the MWU had an extremely negative and stereotyped image in progressive labour circles. It was the image of a backward, racist and brutal organization that was nothing but an anachronism from the old South Africa. Thus Karl von Holdt (2003: 230-231), former editor of the *South African Labour Bulletin*, scornfully depicted the office interior of an MWU organiser in Witbank:

*The office...was filled with icons of apartheid, and of a white man's biography in a white man's country: a photograph of the architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoerd, a large model of a boer ox-wagon on a table; on the wall several brass images of wild animals, and one of two hands meeting in prayer; on another table a small replica R1 military rifle with a plaque inscribed with the words 'Border Duty'...And most explicit of all, a poster referring to an informal discourse usually omitted from the formal language of apartheid, but underpinning it: it depicted a row of figures starting with a baboon on all fours, then a stooped cave man, followed by a somewhat less stooped 'kaffir', and finally an erect white man. This poster, in the office of a white man...[who] was now an official of MWU, indicates the kind of racism experienced in work relations between black and white.*

Even an Afrikaner establishment paper such as *Die Burger* jokingly referred to the MWU as a "bitter-mouthed" reactionary institution dominated by members of the CP, the HNP and the AWB (Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging) ("Dawie" 2004: 16). From 1994 to 1997 the MWU stagnated. Its right-wing image was politically incorrect and it was perceived to be only for blue-collar mineworkers. The public viewed the MWU negatively and the union moved from being a national role-player to being a marginalized shop-floor union. In addition, many of its members were retrenched or disaffected. It became clear that in the light of the radically altered political and economic realities of South Africa after 1994, the MWU had reached a crossroads. To avoid further stagnation and to remain a significant player in the shrinking labour market of the post-apartheid economy, the union had to choose between a complete rethinking of its vision, strategies and structures – reinventing itself, as it were – or drifting into a cul-de-sac (Backer 2001: 68).

## **5. Transforming from MWU to Solidarity**

In July 1997 Flip Buys succeeded Peet Ungerer – the first general secretary in the history of the MWU who was not himself a miner (Buys 2001). An

academically-trained intellectual, Buys was characteristic of a new generation of white-collar trade union officials who had to function in a totally changed labour milieu. The old practice, where blue-collar union leaders were forged by years of practical experience on the factory floor or in the mine stopes, was simply no longer adequate to meet the complexities and demands of modern trade union management. The radical changes which occurred in South African trade unionism towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demanded new skills in labour and strategic management.

Buys's background, training and experience made him eligible for the job of general secretary in more ways than one. Apart from obtaining a bachelor's degree in political science and communications at Potchefstroom University in 1988, he had a historical connection with the union in that his grandfather participated in the 1922 strike. As a student he was the chairperson of the local CP branch and also served on the student representative council. After completion of his studies, Buys was appointed labour relations officer at Escom and in 1990 was promoted to a senior position in that capacity. In the same year he joined the MWU and was responsible for labour relations, marketing, training and communications. From 1995 to 1997 he left the MWU for the Freedom Front as organizer (Ungerer 1991: 4; Durand 1997: 1,3; Buys 2001).

Buys viewed his new position as a calling rather than a job and his appointment at the MWU imbued the organisation with a new vitality. He had a sober and realistic grasp of the realities of a post-apartheid South Africa, distinguished by new labour legislation such as the Labour Relations Act and the Employment Equity Act. In terms of the new labour dispensation the union was in a crisis and in order to survive a drastic and profound change of policy was necessary. The international as well as the South African economy was rapidly and irrevocably changing from an industrial to an information-driven economy. In addition, the number of white-collar workers was beginning to surpass the number of blue-collar workers and the labour scene was rapidly changing from one consisting of industrially-skilled workers to so-called knowledge workers. For Buys it became clear that the MWU would have to plan and think anew in terms of strategic labour relations and management and that new expertise would have to be imported into the union. Thus the MWU would have to make a paradigm shift in its philosophy towards labour. Buys's role model was Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, who succeeded in transforming an under-developed Muslim country into a modern secular state. Buys's realization that the CP lacked a realistic alternative for South Africa's racial problems was the turning point in his Buys's change of heart can also be regarded as a desire to move from a political thinking (MWU General Council Minutes 1998: 7,18; Buys 2001). position of being an "oppressor" in the apartheid South Africa to non-victim and being a contributor rather than a loser in the new political and economic environment.

Buys expounded a new vision in terms of strategic thinking. In view of changed circumstances the MWU would have to rethink its strategy, modernize, reposition and reinvent itself, as it were. Expertise from within the

union, as well as externally, would have to be utilized in order to initiate a strategic master plan, called Wenplan 2002, for the next five years. Buys did not regard the MWU as an institution still consisting of a group of reactionaries who fought for a better past, but rather as a modern organization that worked and strove towards a better future for all its members, while taking cognisance of the realities of South Africa. The MWU would have to establish itself as a leader on the labour front and place itself strategically on the forefront of all aspects of labour relations. A big problem was affirmative action, which Buys regarded as unfair racial discrimination towards whites. Although recognizing its validity, the MWU did not approach the issue of affirmative action from a redress point of view. In advocating the rights of white workers they relied on the new South African Constitution. Therefore a comprehensive and practical strategy would have to be developed to counter the negative effects of affirmative action, which also included court action in cases of discriminatory and unfair labour practices. Initiatives for entrepreneurship and job creation, as well as alternative careers and compensation schemes for young people and those who were forced to take retirement packages, would have to be investigated and promoted. To create new jobs for retrenched workers, a business arm would have to be established.

The new strategic planning covered the whole spectrum of labour relations. Therefore new structures would also have to be created within the MWU. As a first phase of strategic planning, union representatives would be empowered by in-service training in labour relations. A new department for training and development would have to be established within the MWU to manage the training strategy. In addition, a strategic labour council, consisting of researchers and advisors, would have to be established in order to provide the union with research and support services on labour issues. Lastly, Buys also realized that, since the era of the information revolution and information economy has dawned, it became imperative that union personnel should be adequately trained in information technology. Thus, the MWU's information management system was upgraded and modernized in terms of its computer network. A new communications department for internal and external communication was created, the legal department was extended and a new marketing department was envisaged (MWU General Council Minutes 1998: 4-5,8-13,17-18,77; MWU Executive Council Minutes 26.8.1998: 13; 28.10.1998: 8; Buys 1997: 1-2; Backer 2001: 68-69).

Under Buys the MWU would position itself as a free-market trade union based on the models of the Christelik-Nasionale Vakbond of Holland, and similar unions in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Buys was also in favour of so-called "stakeholder capitalism", where the labour force is involved in profit-sharing, as against the American model of profit-driven shareholder capitalism (Williams 2002: 2).

In order to implement Buys's new vision and strategy for the MWU, a corps of young and energetic academically-trained personnel was appointed. These were people with bachelor degrees in industrial psychology, labour relations and communication, and it became clear that the MWU management was transforming from a blue-collar shop-floor-driven union to a white-collar

information-economy-driven organization (see MWU General Council Minutes 1998: 8; 1999: 37; 2000: 10; Backer 2001: 69).

The drastic restructuring did not take place without teething problems, though. The union's old bureaucratic structures and the composition of personnel had to be streamlined. There were too many staff members in terms of total union membership. If the MWU was to survive, the affordability of its officials would have to be based on business principles. Each section and union district became a cost unit of its own. The implication of the structural changes was that the operations of those units which did not make a profit would have to be curtailed so as not to affect the financial viability of the MWU as no cross-subsidization of any unit could be tolerated. Thus "new blood" had to be infused and "dead wood" had to be pruned in the staff composition. The MWU's remuneration policy was still based on the outdated bureaucratic principles of service years and had to be revised in order to become more market-related. In future the expertise and competence of staff members were to be evaluated according to a system of merit. To comply with the clauses of the new South African constitution, in which racial discrimination was prohibited, the MWU's own constitution had to be adjusted accordingly. The word "white" had to be scrapped from the constitution as no institution could restrict membership to a specific race any longer. In future, the MWU would have to uphold its predominant Afrikaans character free from any inclination towards racial preference (MWU Executive Council Minutes 17.12.1997: 28; 26.8.1998: 8; 28.10.1998: 3-7,12; 25.11.1998: 3-4; 26.5.1999: 5-7,9).

Of the MWU's thirteen competitors in the white labour market in 1995, only three remained by 2000, of which two were struggling for survival. Since 1991 the labour market shrank by one million jobs and the information revolution and new management practices were changing the economy as well. Large-scale rationalization of personnel in industry and early retirement also affected the numbers of trade unions such as the MWU. There were no large industries left still to be conquered as far as union organization was concerned and even traditionally large trade union-orientated industries began to fall into decline. The resolve of the MWU, with its 60 000 members (1995 figures), to reform and reinvent itself amidst a changing labour situation was therefore timeous (MWU Executive Council Minutes 31.5.2000: 4).

The MWU's restructuring was based on the model of the Histadrut, an Israeli super trade union and labour federation that Buys had visited on a tour to the Middle East. The Histadrut was founded by David Ben-Gurion in 1920 to solve an unemployment crisis in Palestine. It became involved in education, job creation and general services, and almost functioned as a state within a state. Factories, which processed agricultural products from the kibbutz, were erected with Histadrut pension funds. Kibbutzim, hospitals, schools, banks, sporting facilities, business enterprises, assurance companies, wholesale companies, chain stores, medical and pension schemes were managed by the union's affiliates and divisions, which provided jobs to almost one million people. By 1998 the Histadrut was still the largest employer in Israel and owned 20% of the country's economy. Employees in Histadrut enterprises

earned more than other workers in Israel and they were running their own businesses. Buys was therefore of the opinion that the MWU could take a feather from Histadrut's cap and build its plans for the future on that model (Buys 1998: 6; Buys 2001; Backer 2001: 69).

Since 1998, therefore, a series of comprehensive initiatives, many of which were similar to the Histadrut model, was launched to transform the MWU from a trade union into a labour movement and service provider based on a three-pronged approach. Firstly, a vigorous national recruitment campaign was launched to augment the union's numbers and also to cater for individual members who wished to join the MWU. The campaign made use of election-style posters appealing to workers: "Times have changed. You need the MWU now". Pamphlets, newspapers, presentations by means of overhead projectors, agricultural exhibitions and a bilingual marketing video were utilized to reach potential members. The recruitment drive proved to be a huge success as a significant number of new members from city councils, and especially workers from Telkom, Escom and other employers in the Western Cape, signed up. Uniklub, a separate division for individual members was established – the first of its kind in South African trade unionism. It made provision for unorganized individuals and smaller groups of workers who were also in need of trade union protection. Undoubtedly Uniklub filled a great gap in trade union organization as this newly-created section of the MWU grew by a phenomenal 8 000 members within the first two years of its existence (MWU Executive Council Minutes 26.5.1999: 15-16; 29.9.1999: 32; Backer 2001: 69-70; Cant & Machado 2002: 48-49).

In addition, an MWU marketing emblem was designed which symbolized the union's credo. The letters M and W, in yellow, were put one on top of the other referring to the union's name. The spaces between the two letters formed two blue diamonds, representing the power of its members. A white stripe between the letters depicted "the continuous role of the MWU in the history of South Africa". The colour yellow referred to the union's origins in the mining industry, while the colour blue symbolized strength (Hermann 1999: 9,11). A bilingual Internet website was created in order to enhance public access to information about the MWU. The purpose was to communicate important information about the MWU to union members swiftly and on a daily basis. With the creation of *Soldeer*, an electronic newsletter, members could receive union news on a weekly basis. In 2006 this website was awarded second place (second only to a British website) in an international competition (<http://www.solidaritysa.co.za>).

The second pillar of the three-pronged strategy was the launching of Unifonds, a comprehensive financial services group. The idea was to provide cheaper short-term insurance, a pension and medical aid scheme, group packages, death benefits, micro loans, and insurance and investment services to its members at competitive tariffs. Through Unifonds the MWU National Retirement Fund was established in partnership with Coris Capital. From this venture emanated Fin-Q in 2003. And in October 1999 an agreement was reached with Kopano Medical Care, whereby union members had access to the Fleximed product, which formed the basis of the MWU's own medical aid

scheme. In 2001 a medical aid and brokerage venture was initiated under the name Solmark to provide MWU members and their families with affordable and quality health care. Personal bank cards for MWU members also created a virtual shopping centre. According to Buys, the idea of the financial services group was to guide union members to economic independence in order to maintain control over their own savings (Hermann 1998: 8; Backer 2001 70; Cant & Machado 2002: 50; MWU General Council Minutes 2000: 1 and 2002: 25).

Another purpose of the financial group was to generate capital from profits accumulated to initiate job creation as a third pillar in the new MWU structure. Profits generated from Unifonds were channelled to a job-creation network called Werknet. In conjunction with business experts Werknet invested in job-creation projects, which in the light of the new Occupation Equity Act, affirmative action and retrenchments, became an urgent priority. Werknet aimed at creating 100 000 job opportunities within a decade. To encourage such endeavours a job-creation summit was organized to determine the extent of white unemployment and to discuss plans to create new jobs. In May 1999 Netmark, a labour brokerage and personnel agency, was founded as an affiliate of Werknet. By means of labour placements and labour leasing skilled unemployed persons were assisted in being actively reintegrated into the economy.

By 2001 Netmark had already placed 1500 workers in institutions and in companies such as the Department of Public Works, Sentrachem, Samancor, Iscor, Sasol, Cape Gate, MMC, Impala Platinum, Ingwe, Steinmuller, New Vaal, Goldfields and JCI Mining. In cases of unavoidable retrenchments a social plan was negotiated with employers that made provision for the retraining and business training of such workers. In this way their permanent unemployment could be averted (Hermann 1998: 8; Backer 2001: 70-71; Cant & Machado 2002: 51; MWU General Council Minutes 2000: 14; 2002: 23). Another enterprise of the MWU's job-creation pillar was the establishment of Sol-Tech in January 2006 in Centurion, Pretoria. The union identified a large gap with regard to the training of workers in the labour market. Sol-Tech was the union's answer to the rising skills shortage in South Africa. In this way the MWU became the only trade union in South Africa which was also registered as a training institution (<http://www.solidaritysa.co.za>).

In contrast to its former strategy of reverting to protest actions against the introduction of affirmative action in the workplace, since the advent of the Buys administration the MWU has been pursuing a proactive policy. On the one hand, the union accepted affirmative action as an inescapable reality of the new South African labour dispensation, but on the other hand, it sought by means of scientific investigation to provide creative solutions for the victims of such policies. In February 1998 a conference on affirmative action was organized by the MWU and a task team was commissioned to develop solutions for those whites whose careers were detrimentally affected by this policy. In August 1998 a labour code consisting of 50 guidelines on fair implementation of affirmative action was presented to the portfolio committee on labour in Parliament. With this initiative the MWU tried to prevent the

creation “of a new pool of skilled unemployed workers” in South Africa. Dirk Hermann edited a publication, *Die balanskant van “regstellende aksie”*, to portray the negative affects of affirmative action and to provide suggestions on how to deal with this controversial issue in a positive way. The MWU also planned a so-called equality agreement on affirmative action between the ANC government and the Afrikaans community.

In some instances the union’s legal actions against affirmative action were also successful such as the high-profile Sarita van Coller case. Van Coller was a white female employee from Escom who was unfairly discriminated against in her application for promotion. The court’s ruling in the MWU and Van Coller’s favour also contributed to an increase in union membership. The MWU regarded unfair affirmative action to be “institutional racism”, “ethnic purification” and a “race-driven transformation of the labour market”, and submitted a comprehensive report on this matter to the National Conference on Racism in Durban in 2000. Although ANC politicians held a different opinion, the MWU’s point of view was that affirmative action, as defined by the South African Constitution, placed an impenetrable ceiling on whites with regard to promotion in the workplace. The union harboured fears that affirmative action might become a permanent feature of South Africa society, thereby encouraging many young whites to emigrate. Therefore the Human Rights Commission was requested to investigate this form of “neo-racism” in the workplace (Hermann 2000: 3; Buys 2000: 5,10; MWU General Council Minutes 2002: 34-35).

In its new approach towards contentious issues the MWU rather used constitutional methods to combat the neglect of Afrikaans as language of communication in the workplace. Complaints against employers such as Escom, Iscor, Sasol, Telkom, Transnet, the Department on the Interior, the Department of Public Works, the Post Office, the University of South Africa, Anglogold, the Gauteng Provincial Administration and the Witwatersrand Technikon were submitted to the Pan South African Language Council (PANSAT). These institutions were accused of using only English as language of communication and of “disregarding the languages of the majority of their employees whose home language was not English”. Eventually, after having to resort to the courts, the MWU was successful in forcing Escom, Telkom, Transnet, the Post Office and the Department of Public Works to revise their language policies (MWU Executive Council Minutes 23.2.2000: 11; 30.8.2000: 33; Du Toit 2001: 7).

## **6. Solidarity in the new millennium**

In light of the MWU’s transformation and restructuring to become a labour movement in the broader sense, the name of the organization had to be reviewed. Since the 1990s the union was no longer solely representative of miners, and with the dawn of the new millennium the name “Mineworkers’ Union” had become an anachronism. Consequently, as a result of the merger of five unions, a new trade union entity, MWU-Solidarity, came about. These five unions were comprised of the MWU, the South African Workers’ Union, or SAWU (which was a name change for the old Iron and Steel Union), the

Transport Union, the Denel Union and the Forestry and Plantation Management Union. Flip Buys also became the general secretary of MWU-Solidarity.

MWU-Solidarity's first press release presented a challenge to other white unions. It stated that with the establishment of MWU-Solidarity and its 93 000 strong membership, South Africa's largest independent trade union had come into being. Consequently, only two trade union movements could remain in South Africa, namely MWU-Solidarity and COSATU. According to Buys, MWU-Solidarity's exceptional growth was the result of its post-apartheid stance and its stated intention to protect Afrikaner worker interests. The existing trade union model was out-dated, therefore a reorganization of its structures became imperative. In contrast with the 1980s, when the union was aligned with right-wing political groups, it had repositioned itself completely outside of party politics and followed "mainstream policies" instead. MWU-Solidarity's continued growth was all-important to serve as "antipode" and protection against discrimination towards the Afrikaans minority. Therefore it would also cater for the Afrikaners' cultural needs. The balance of power between the (black) majority and the Afrikaans minority had become considerably distorted since the promulgation of the South African Constitution of 1996 and by 2001 companies were able, "without much obstruction", to discriminate against minorities. Thus a greater equilibrium between these powers was imperative. While opposition parties were unable to fulfil such a role, organizations within civil society such as MWU-Solidarity would have to bargain for the Afrikaans minority (Du Toit 2001: 8).

The "Solidarity" part in the union's new name was derived from *Solidarinosc*, the Polish union established in 1980. Although the MWU did not have any historical or formal linkages with the Polish union it decided to adopt this name because *Solidarinosc* served as an example of a labour organisation which formed a power block of opposition to the unpopular communist regime of that country and was therefore associated all over the world with anti-communist trade unionism (Buys 2001; Du Toit 2001: 8; Williams 2002: 2).

On the one hand, the establishment of MWU-Solidarity also brought the old rivalry between the MWU and SAWU for new members to an amiable end. Although the MWU was bigger and by 2000 financially more sound than SAWU, the latter brought 18 000 workers into MWU-Solidarity and created an opportunity to organize workers in the motor industry as well (MWU Executive Council Minutes 25.10.2000: 1-2; 31.1.2001: 7-8). On the other hand, MWU-Solidarity's successes and challenging statement with regard to its membership seemed to have elicited some envy in union ranks. The Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA), a racially mixed trade union federation representing some 530 000 workers from 28 affiliates, indignantly replied that the MWU had been refused membership of this federation earlier as a result of its conservative policies. However, MWU-Solidarity's successes in coaxing away some 50 000 workers from FEDUSA after 1994 went a long way towards unleashing this criticism (Louw 2001: 2; Mabasa 2001: 4).

Ironically, MWU-Solidarity's structural changes would also lead to a physical change of address. Because of the excessively high maintenance costs of its ageing headquarters in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, declining property values and rental income, as well as the general social decay of the Braamfontein business district, the union eventually decided in 2001 to move its head office to Centurion, Pretoria. The relocation to Pretoria not only heralded the end of an era for the MWU, but was also symbolic of its own metamorphosis (see e.g. MWU Executive Council Minutes July 2000 – March 2001).

In September 2002 MWU-Solidarity was finally renamed Solidarity. It was argued that the union now catered for all trades and that other workers and unions would feel more comfortable about signing up under the new union name. The original recruitment emblem and colours of 1998 were retained, albeit in a somewhat altered format (MWU Executive Council Minutes 25.9.2002: 4). By 2002, five years after the implementation of Wenplan 2002, Solidarity was a totally reinvented, dynamic and transformed labour movement with federal characteristics, adequately equipped and geared to address the demands and challenges that organized labour would have to face in the new millennium. It had an estimated annual income of more than R50 million. Before 1997 the MWU was a relatively unknown institution outside of the sphere of labour. At best its public image was that of a reactionary, racist and obstructionist remnant of a previous era, which stubbornly tried to resist becoming a part of post-apartheid South African society. In contrast, Solidarity became a prominent national role player in many spheres. The union had shaken off its reactionary right-wing image and took a centre-right position.

Since 1997 its numbers have risen dramatically, from 63 000 in 2000 to more than 130 000 by 2005 when 6% of the membership was female. Thus Solidarity became the trade union with the largest growth curve in South Africa. The membership profile gradually changed from semi-skilled and skilled blue-collar workers to predominantly technically-trained workers in hi-tech jobs. Its scope was extended from 73 employers at the beginning of the 1990s to 1400 in 2002. Solidarity has 1000 branches in 7000 workplaces with 215 full-time employees in 25 offices country-wide. Therefore, a century since the establishment of the Transvaal Miners' Association, Solidarity could truly claim not only to be the largest and oldest independent trade union entity in South Africa<sup>†</sup>, but also the biggest union for skilled and highly-skilled workers. And by 2000 it had also become the biggest organized Afrikaans membership organization (MWU General Council Minutes 2000: 7 and 2002: 12; Backer 2001: 70-71; Cant & Machado 2002: 43; <http://www.solidaritysa.co.za>).

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<sup>†</sup> The premise for Solidarity's assumption that it is the largest and oldest independent trade union in South Africa is based on the fact that both COSATU, with 1,8 million members in 21 affiliated unions, and FEDUSA, with 530 000 members in 28 affiliated unions, are trade union federations, whereas Solidarity functions as a single trade union entity. In a strictly historical sense, the South African Typographical Union, founded in 1898, is the oldest existing South African trade union, but it functions as a non-independent FEDUSA affiliate.

Quite contrary to the MWU's vehement opposition to the legalization of black unions in the 1970s and its anti-communist views, Solidarity adopted a pragmatic position towards the COSATU unions and the SACP. As early as 1993 already the MWU had joined the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) in a strike at Highveld Steel in Witbank and later also at Columbus Steel in Middelburg. In 2001 the two unions rejoined in a strike at Highveld Steel on wage demands (Von Holdt 2003: 264-265; Von Holdt 2005: 70; Matlala 1993: 8-10). In 2000 the MWU and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) signed an agreement of co-operation on matters of mutual interest. These included an agreement to prevent the spread of AIDS. Henceforth Solidarity and COSATU unions such as the NUM, NUMSA and the Communications Workers Union jointly organized strikes and pacts of co-operation on issues such as wages, occupational safety, employees' benefits and job security. Solidarity also gave moral support to COSATU in its demonstration against human rights violations in Zimbabwe (See e.g. Nel 2002: 51, 128-129; Du Plessis 2001: 18; Du Toit 2005: 8).

As a show of good faith to co-operate where mutual interests were concerned, Solidarity also accepted an invitation to attend the SACP's conference in Rustenburg in September 2002. The union argued that the occasion offered them a forum to engage in a dialogue with ideological opponents, who were influential partners in the government alliance, on issues such as affirmative action (MWU Executive Council Minutes 31.7.2002: 23; De Lange 2002: 11; Gunning 2002: 1). Solidarity honoured its social responsibilities towards the public in several ways and especially when the liquidation of the DRD goldmine in Stilfontein in 2005 left 6513 workers without an income. In conjunction with the Stilfontein community, Solidarity provided emergency relief and school feeding schemes to the value of R100 000. In this way, 3000 families and individuals, regardless of colour, received relief (Buys 2005: 12; <http://www.solidaritysa.co.za>). In addition, Solidarity continued its traditional involvement with Afrikaner cultural affairs. The union became a partner of the education bursary fund of the Afrikaans Sunday paper *Rapport* by donating R100 000 for the training of Afrikaans-speaking teachers, regardless of colour. And in 2006 Solidarity established Afriforum to encourage minority groups such as Afrikaners who began to withdraw from the public sphere since 1994 to participate in public debate and civil actions (Buys 2006: 16; Van Eeden 2003: 4; O'Connor 2006: 5).

In conjunction with the union's constitutional changes in 1998, whereby membership of Solidarity would henceforth be based on freedom of association only, the once exclusive focus on Afrikaners as trade unionists also shifted somewhat. In 2005 its website stated that, in terms of social responsibility, it was Solidarity's prime but not exclusive objective to support people in "white poverty" (MWU General Council Minutes 2000: 8; <http://www.solidaritysa.co.za>). Not surprisingly therefore, Coloured workers in the Western Cape, especially civil servants who were negatively affected by affirmative action, began to seek the protection of Solidarity. By 2003 10% of its members were Coloureds. Probably the most telling example that in the new millennium Solidarity was a different union in terms of vision and mentality to the old MWU of the twentieth century occurred when it declared a

dispute with Escom in 2006 on behalf of a Coloured engineer, Leon Christiaans. Christiaans alleged that, as a result of black affirmative action, he was discriminated against when applying for a job promotion. However, judgement was given against Solidarity and Christiaans (De Lange 2003: 1; Merton 2006: 1).

In 2005 Solidarity bought a new head-office in Botha Avenue, Centurion from Kumba Resources for R6.4 million (MWU Executive Council Minutes 25.5.2005 and 28.9.2005). Whereas the selling of the old MWU building in Braamfontein, Johannesburg represented the end of an era, the purchase of the new office building symbolized Solidarity's confidence in, and optimism about the future.

Cant and Machado (2002: 52) agreed that through innovation Solidarity has developed a new trade union model. For Solidarity, they claim, the requirement for survival is to continually develop this trade union model by means of creative ideas in an economy where knowledge doubles every eighteen months. As a trade union which successfully redesigned and repositioned itself amidst tremendous challenges, and which was able to shed the negative aspects of its past, Solidarity will surely meet these conditions.

## **7. The Implications of the changes from MWU to Solidarity**

In terms of labour relations the MWU was renowned for its abrasive and sometimes hostile, rather than amicable engagement with the state and employer organisations such as the Chamber of Mines. Under Arrie Paulus the union often reverted to brinkmanship tactics in order to obtain improved benefits for its members and compliance with its demands from employers by force rather than constructive negotiation. But as a result of its negative and obstructive right-wing image, the MWU began to stagnate after 1994. It became an isolated entity and was marginalized as a national role-player in the South African labour dispensation to the extent of becoming a mere shop floor union.

On the other hand, a major reason for the MWU's successes was the ability to change its tactics and strategy during crucial periods of its existence. Firstly, by extending its traditional scope to industries beyond the mining industry, the MWU succeeded in turning around dwindling membership trends. Solidarity could therefore justly claim to have become the largest independent trade union with the largest growth curve among labour unions in South Africa since 1997. In addition, it serves as a counter to balance COSATU's otherwise dominating influence of the South African labour scene. Thus the creation of Solidarity was an important development in also extending the scope of South African trade unionism thereby ensuring a position for white workers in post-apartheid South Africa, albeit under non-discriminatory labour conditions.

A second crucial intervention responsible for the union's ultimate success was Flip Buys's tenure as MWU general secretary, guiding the organisation's subsequent transformation to Solidarity. These changes occurred at the same time as a change in the world economy to one that is information-driven,

and Solidarity's membership base changed from blue-collar semi-skilled and skilled mine and factory workers to highly-skilled and technically-skilled workers, which also included white-collar workers. In its strategic repositioning the Buys administration began to deal proactively with the labour demands and challenges of the new millennium in a number of innovative ways. Thus a new collective negotiating strategy was developed in answer to the demands of the time to include issues such as productivity and individual performance. In order to counterpoise the negative effects of globalisation and the information revolution, Solidarity developed a comprehensive social responsibility plan, including assistance to members who had lost their jobs to be placed back in the active economy. Solidarity's broadening of its agenda, services, role and functions in order to be a mainstream organisation able to provide for the broad interests and needs of its members implied a strategic shift from collective bargaining only to being a collective-bargaining as well as a service-providing labour organisation. In order to increase Solidarity's horizontal and vertical density, one of the union's innovative strategies was to focus on the inclusion of white-collar workers and individuals who did not traditionally belong to unions, as well as expanding horizontally to include workers in existing firms who were not yet trade union members and also other subsidiaries of firms who were not yet organised. Solidarity's option of membership to individual employees in firms who were too few to be organised collectively was a first for trade union organisation in South Africa.

In accordance with its participative management style, the union's internal management structures were also changed in order to decentralise responsibilities to improve ownership and accountability. In contrast to the MWU's autocratic management in previous times this innovation had a remarkably positive impact on union-employee relations in general and on worker participation in Solidarity's actions and community-outreach social care initiatives in particular, as was evident in the dramatic increase of its membership and the extension of its scope to non-traditional labour structures since 1997. In this way Solidarity also became a community union in the true sense of the word. Thus the union has established an alternative model of trade union organisation suitable for the labour demands of the new millennium. In terms of its structures Solidarity is transforming from being an industrial union to become a labour service organisation with federative features.

## **7. Conclusion**

The MWU, albeit as Solidarity now, is one of only a few labour unions which can boast of more than one hundred years' of continued operations since its founding and which was able to survive apartheid South Africa. From an atomized nucleus of a few hundred mineworkers in 1902 union membership had grown to more than 130 000 by 2005. This in itself is one of the most remarkable achievements in South African trade union and labour history. As these are still early days since the metamorphosis of the old unyielding and racist MWU into the apparent progressive Solidarity, it is difficult to regard the transformation other than a "success story" at this stage. The Afrikaans press responded in a very positive way to what were perceived as a profound about-

turn of the union's strategies (See e.g. Retief 2002: 13). Even in progressive labour circles such as the *South African Labour Bulletin* the changes that Solidarity have introduced were discussed in receptive terms (See e.g. *SALB* 2003: 31).

Perhaps one of the key salient features of the reinvention of the MWU as Solidarity is the fact that the union was to a great extent able to shed negative, racist image that organised white labour had acquired in apartheid South Africa. Its pragmatic approach of engaging with former "enemies" of white labour – such as COSATU and the SACP - on shared worker interests, including work safety, job security and training, and its efforts to ensure that its membership base is no longer linked to gender or race, are indeed positive signs that Solidarity is positioning itself as a transformed and recognised labour organisation in post-apartheid South Africa.

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