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OVERSTRETCHED? . . . The jury is out as to whether labour unions have sufficient capacity to advance and monitor the skills development needs of their members
Picture: Khaya Ngwenya

Union agendas inked in black and white
MPHO SIBANYONI

THE chasm between the activities of
South Africa's predominantly black
labour federations and their white coun-
terparts appears to be increasing.
This comes as the predominantly white
union Solidarity is building a private col-
lege in Pretoria that aims to alleviate the
skills-shortage crisis the country faces.
The Sol-Tech is expected to open next
year and will offer learners a minimum
education level of Grade 9, a three-year
course in fitting machining, megatron-
ics, motor mechanics and electronics.

It plans to have registered 1000 stu-
dents by 2011.
Paul van Deventer, the managing di-
rector of Sol-Tech, says students who
enrol for the three-year diploma will also
be taught courses in management and
entrepreneurship.
"We want these students to know how
to start and run their own small business-
es that will provide long-term jobs," Van
Deventer says.
The idea of unions erecting colleges is
not really new.
Labour unions affiliated to labour fed-
eration Cosatu, like the National Union

Cosatu focuses on politics, Solidarity skills

of Mineworkers and National Union of
Metal Workers, run their own colleges,
but they specialise in grooming shop
stewards to become better leaders in
wage disputes, strikes and fighting for
employees' rights.
University of Johannesburg sociology
professor Sakhela Buhlungu hailed Soli-
darity's college, addingthatthe country's
skills-shortage crisis could become a
thing of the past if other labour federa-
tions implemented similar strategies.
Buhlungu, who has been writing re-
search papers on the state of trade un-
ions, said it was one of the primary duties
of labour unions to help the country erad-
icate the skills shortage crisis.
"Trade unions have two major priori-
ties. These include improving their mem-
bers' wages and working conditions," he
said. "Improving the working conditions
relates to things like the medical aids,
pension funds and skills development."
Buhlungu said labour unions should
act as watchdogs to monitor whether the
country's Skills Development Act was be-

ing properly implemented.
The Skills Development Act, which
was authored by labour federations and
the government, led to the formation of
the Sector Education and Training Au-
thorities (Setas).
However, Buhlungu does not believe
skills development will be on Cosatu's
agenda in the short term.
"It seems like next year's general elec-
tions will keep the labour federation busy
in a way that raising the issue of skills
development colleges will be like wasting
their time," he said.
He said the problem with the Setas was
not that the government had not set aside
enough funds but that there was a short-
age of professionals with the necessary
skills to best manage them.
"The government has pumped millions
of rands into the Setas but if you look at
how they are run, you will realise that
they are dysfunctional and run by incom-
petent people," he said.
Other reasons mentioned by Buhlungu
that would push skills development off

the agendas of unions were that they
were involved in ongoing battles with
employers over retrenchments and wage
disputes.
"The unions end up being so over-
stretched by the challenges they face
daily that the monitoring of the progress
made by Setas ends up falling down the
list of priorities," he said.
Cosatu skills development policy coor-
dinator Sekete Moshoeshoe said the la-
bour federation was planning to have a
meeting to discuss if it would be feasible
for its affiliates to set up skills develop-
ment institutions.

"If we do decide to build the colleges,
we'll have to state which unions are going
to own them and in which provinces they
will be set up," he said.
National Council of Trade Unions
(Nactu) spokesperson Manene Samela
said there were no plans to build a college
because the labour federation believed
this responsibility rested with the
government.
"There are Setas in existence and we
have been channelling lots of our re-
sources, like training materials and
skills, towards making sure that they are
run successfully," he said.

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