

The trade union question



SACIA

Over the Past few weeks there's been quite a lot of press about the proposed launch of a new union to represent employees working in the cultural and creative industries. Established by Basil Dube as the self-appointed Union Convenor, the South African Media Creative and Cultural Workers Union (SAMCCWU) has described itself as 'a progressive trade union organisation that will represent, protect and fight for the rights of filmmakers, writers, musicians, arts educators, craft workers, television crews and technicians, workers in radio broadcasting, tourism as well as those employed in government arts and culture departments, cinema and production houses and academic institutions.'

but rather work as freelance contractors on specific projects. This is as true for AV technicians as it is for actors, writers, musicians, video editors and camera crew.

Since a union represents the interests of individuals who are employed rather than individuals who define themselves as contractors, it's difficult to understand who might want to join this new Union. Most of the disciplines active in the creative workspace are already represented by Societies or Guilds, while the acting community, through the South African Guild of Actors, is already aligned with UASA, a union registered with the Department of Labour.

While the film industry is not unionised, the interests of industry professionals working in film are largely governed by commercial agreements entered into between production companies and the freelance crew who are employed both on and off set. These guidelines cover job descriptions, rates of pay, working hours, and a host of other issues that clearly define the rights and obligations of production companies and the contractors working on set. While the guidelines were originally drafted by the Commercial Producers Association (CPA) and are deemed binding on CPA members, they are so universally applied that they've become an industry standard adopted by all major stakeholders. Similarly, the SA Guild of Editors (SAGE) has published contract templates that define the relationship between editors and production companies, while the Writers Guild (WGSA) has published templates that define the contractual relationship with performance writers. Certainly the position assumed by established writers, editors, technicians, actors and crew is that there's simply no need for another trade union.

Less certain is the position taken by newer entrants to the industry who have expressed their belief that they're denied opportunity to earn a living wage. Unlike experienced technicians with an established network of business contacts, newer entrants within the audio-visual sector battle to secure regular work and have great difficulty in proving their competence. Part of the reason for this lies in the lack of training available to aspirant technicians. Freddie Nyathela's SARA Academy does a great job of training youngsters and provides an NQF-level 4 (matric) qualification to individuals who complete the programme, but the training alone is inadequate and is simply the first step in a process of learning required to match the requirements of employers.

At a higher level, students enrolled in Tshwane University's entertainment technology programme can study all the technical aspects of the entertainment industry up to doctoral level. The backstage world of entertainment offers a broad spectrum of job and career opportunities, and many of the graduates from TUT are snapped up by employers or progress to establish their own businesses. It's the technicians who operate between these two qualification levels that seem to battle the most.

Despite the strong position expressed by Dube, there is a great deal of resistance to his ambitions, not least of all from those he purports to represent.

As this discussion rolls out over the next few months, I thought it might be appropriate to explore the differences between a trade union like SAMCCWU and a professional body like SACIA.

To start with, a trade union is an organisation of workers who have come together to achieve common goals such as improving safety standards, achieving higher pay or creating better working conditions. The trade union, through its leadership, bargains with the employer on behalf of union members in order to maintain or improving the conditions of their employment.

The major differences between a trade union and a professional body like SACIA are: (1) membership in a professional body is only open to industry professionals who meet minimum criteria in terms of qualifications and work experience, while membership in a trade union is open to all employees working in a specific market sector; (2) members of a professional body are required to sign a code of professional conduct and abide by an industry code of conduct; (3) while a trade union is established to represent the interests of members, a professional body is generally the disciplinary/ regulatory body for an industry sector and is responsible for protecting the public interest. (4) the primary objective of a trade union is collective bargaining while the primary aim of a professional body is to set standards, award professional designations and to encourage continuous professional development within the sector.

Having examined the principal differences between a trade union and a professional body or guild it's also interesting to explore the challenges likely to be faced by this new union. The greatest challenge is that the vast majority of individuals active in the creative and cultural space are not employed directly by any one company,

Until the introduction of the SACIA certified AV affiliate designation (SAQA designation 594) these people had no way of demonstrating their competence. Now that the designation is available, industry needs to encourage freelance technicians to write the exam and earn a professional designation – and once they've done so and are able to prove their competence, industry needs to ensure that certified members are contracted and paid at a level that recognises their professional standing.

The problems faced by AV technicians in South Africa are not unique to our country. An alarming report issued by Australian industry group Entertainment Assist in August this year painted a stark picture of mental health in the concert and live entertainment community.

According to the report, Australian concert professionals are three times more likely to seriously consider suicide and twice as likely to attempt suicide as the general public. Severe anxiety is ten times more likely in the entertainment industry than it is in the general population, and depression is five times more likely.

The implications of the report are alarming both for Australia and South Africa and pulls the veil back on a taboo topic that's rarely addressed in trade magazines or industry conferences. Suicide and depression are particularly high among road crews and mid-level professionals who face irregular work patterns which often lead to long-term insomnia and low pay, often without medical benefits or retirement contributions.

According to the report '44% of the respondents agree they don't get enough sleep, and 45.5% have disrupted sleep. This suggests those in the entertainment industry suffer sleep disorders seven times greater than the general population.'

The report also found that '57.9% had problems finding time for their families, 63% had trouble maintaining a social life, and 45% had trouble keeping contact with their friends in the industry.'

'Within the arts and entertainment industry, there is a growing concern and set of investigations into anxiety, especially performance anxiety, where the context of work behaviour becomes so negative that people are no longer able to function either at the optimal level – or sometimes at all,' the report reads.

Entertainment professionals were twice as likely to binge drink than the general population, four times more likely to smoke pot, nine times more likely to abuse prescription drugs and 12 times more likely to use cocaine.

Besides the long hours and exposure to easily available drugs, the reports blames uncertainty about income and work for the sky-high depression rates and found that a road-crew worker is nine times more likely than the general public to kill themselves.

Malcolm Finlay, a member of the TPSA council, has responded to the report by declaring: "This is an industry that gets abused daily by the cheque-book holders. It desperately needs the protection of an independent body."

The question then becomes whether the protection provided by an independent body should come from a Union such as that proposed by Basil Dube, or whether the protection should come from a professional body that promotes health and safety standards, awards professional designations, encourages continuous professional development and protects the public interest.

My assertion is that SACIA is an ideal position to create better working conditions for all professionals working in the audio-visual and live event sector. By promoting the adoption of professional standards and creating an environment in which the skills of all individuals can be formally recognised against the National Qualifications Framework, we create an opportunity for people to work in a professional environment and earn a living wage commensurate with their skill and experience. 🗣️

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