

China – where substitutes appear in court and serve jail time instead of the real criminal

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New book is an entertaining narrative of the SA infantryman

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DISGRUNTLED: South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union member Magaret Ndala speaks in the Good Hope Centre before the workers march to Parliament to hand over a petition in 2008.

PICTURE: MLONDOLOZI MBOLU



MATERIAL GIRL: Elaine Roman, of Mitchells Plain, checks products in the Pals store. Roman has worked at Pals for the past 10 years.

PICTURE: NEIL BAYNES

Women who make us look good

Sactwu is run largely by women and helps the members greatly, from household problems to funding for their children's education, writes **Bianca Capazorio**

TEN YEARS ago, when Elaine Roman started at the Pals clothing factory, she would often see large groups of clothing workers standing in the street in Salt River.

Nowadays when she looks out of her factory floor she sees a "ghost town".

A machinist and a shop steward for the SA Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu), Roman has come a long way since starting as a cleaner.

She is among thousands of women represented by Sactwu, working in an industry dominated by women. Of 100 000 union members, 85 percent are women.

Sactwu was formed on September 15, 1989, when the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union and the Garment Workers Union joined forces.

Sactwu is also a union that has been shaped by women, like Harriet Bolton, who last year posthumously received the Luthuli Order in Bronze for her work in the KZN Garment Workers Union, formed in 1934.

Then there's Liz Abrahams who, in a wave of militancy that swept through the unions, and would eventually contribute to the formation of Sactwu, declared in 1987: "The outdated saying goes that a woman's place is in the kitchen. We say no. A working woman's place is in the union and in the home alongside our men."

And what of Sactwu treasurer Connie September who in 1993 became the first female vice-president of Cosatu?

Over the years, the union has fought major battles for workers and their rights.

In 1990, more than 60 000



CROWNED: Kathleen Adams of Pals Clothing is crowned the Sactwu Spring Queen in 2010. The pageant, which has become part of Cape Town's history, turns Sactwu workers into runway models as they parade down the catwalk in sequined evening gowns to compete for the title.

PICTURE: CINDY WAXA

workers formed human chains in three provinces to show support for the Workers Charter Campaign.

Nine years later, Sactwu workers at Team Puma

embarked on a 16-week wage strike – the longest in the union's history.

In 2002, the union launched its national HIV/Aids programmes in Durban.

And in 2008, union members were among hundreds of thousands of workers who took part in Cosatu marches across the country to protest against rising prices of food and fuel.

Now, about 85 percent of clothing and about 80 percent of textile workers in SA are women, according to Bonita Loubser, Sactwu's second national organising secretary.

Under increasing pressure from cheap imports, the industry has shed thousands of jobs over the past 10 years, forcing major companies to close.

In 2008, 13 000 jobs were lost. In 2009, 14 516. In 2010 the losses slowed to 10 143.

Figures for last year show that the job losses slowed again, but workers still worry.

"It's a very sad situation because factories are closing and people are losing their jobs," Roman says.

She worries about her own job too; earlier this year Pals cut its workforce from around 500 people to 400.

"But luckily some of them have come back now, because things are starting to get better," she says.

Loubser says that in addition to these pressures, their members also face other challenges, including the introduction of shift work.

"Drug abuse and gangsterism in society have placed huge pressure on women in the industry in respect of their attendance at work," she adds.

Roman says economic pressures, like the cost of housing and food, also weigh heavy on workers' minds.

The minimum wage for a machinist varies between R534 and R788 a month, depending on whether the worker lives in a metro or non-metro area, Loubser explains.

But Roman says there are some positives: Sactwu provides social workers to help workers deal with their problems, and has various other initiatives to help them, including health centres, HIV and TB testing centres, and educational programmes.

Between July last year and March this year, the union offered 14 000 male circumcisions, and last year handed out nearly 67 000 male and over 5 000 female condoms in their

HIV prevention campaigns.

Last year, 47 children of Sactwu members graduated with 33 degrees and 14 diplomas through the bursary fund. It has paid nearly R19 million in bursaries over the past six years, and has allowed more than 500 people to graduate as lawyers, scientists, IT professionals and chartered accountants.

Last year Jade Losper became the 35th Sactwu Spring Queen, another achievement making Sactwu proud.

The pageant turns workers into runway models dressed in evening gowns decorated with sequins and sparkles, giving a face to the workers who make our clothes.

Photos, dresses and trinkets from the pageant form part of an exhibition by the UCT Centre for Curating the Archive, held at the UCT's Michaelis art school until last week.

The exhibition will move to the Centre of African Studies in Cape Town next week, where it will run for a month.

Curator Dr Siona O'Connell says the pageant forms part of Cape Town's history. She hopes their work will enable the researchers to piece together an archive of the Spring Queen pageant, which has been lost over the years.

She explains that the pageant represents "a moment where young women can imagine themselves as anything they want to be".

"For one night they can think about the dresses and the details, and put the reality of life on the factory floor; getting up at 5am to go to work, and the low wages, on hold for a bit," says O'Connell.

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