

My journey with the ECA(SA)

By Lucas Bowles, Regional Director, East/South Cape

The ECA(SA) became part of my life the day James Baker phoned me in 1983 and offered me a job as Regional Director. The package included a 1979 second-hand Cortina, which my predecessor had unfortunately crashed at the Fountains Circle in Pretoria, but I wasn't going to let that stand in my way. Besides I had always dreamt of a job with a company car, so I waited patiently while the panel beaters repaired it, and then proudly drove it home to show the family.

And so, my journey with the ECA(SA) started on 1 June 1983. Ernie Brough, the President that year made it clear: "I have a business to run. You have a job to do at the ECA(SA). Phone me only when you have to."

On the labour front, the first Collective Agreement for the provinces of Transvaal, Free State and Northern Cape were concluded between the ECA(SA) and South African Equity Workers' Association (SAEWA) and published on 17 August 1984. There were many questions and arguments about the Agreement among the membership at the time, so it was my job to criss-cross the region to inform members of their obligations in terms of the new agreement.

New era

In a sense, a new era had dawned in the ECA(SA). I was responsible for servicing the membership in the old provinces of Transvaal, Orange Free State and Northern Cape. The Natal region had been established by that time and was serviced by Pieter van der Westhuizen whilst Pierre Foot looked after the interests of members in the Western and Eastern Cape. In East London, the ECA(SA) and SAEWA had negotiated a separate collective agreement and the ECA employed a part-time secretary in that area.

Natal had its own Collective Agreement as did the Western Cape. During 1981, the Department of Labour (DoL) had published the Conditions of Apprenticeship for apprentices in the Electrical Contracting Industry. Previously our Industry was under the jurisdiction of the Building Industry. The ECA(SA) had, however, severed its ties with Building Industries Federation South Africa (BIFSA) during the late 70s, a step which gave the ECA autonomy and enabled it to make its own decisions for the benefit of its members, without having to work through the complex BIFSA structures.

Labour levy

Federated Employers Insurance Company sent out the labour levy returns, and members were required to submit these monthly to the respective Industrial Council offices. For the first time, we were in charge of our own destiny and could budget according to our membership numbers. Recruitment of new members had become a critical issue and I was tasked with increasing membership at the respective branches. Suddenly, 'representivity' became a crucial issue as the Agreement negotiated



with SAEWA and the Metal and Electrical Workers Union of South Africa (Mewusa) was valid for only one year and the threat of not being representative in order to conclude the next agreement with the unions was very real.

Carel Venter

On the training front, the Electrical Development and Training Fund (EDTF) had been established and all employers in the electrical industry were now, for the first time, obliged to contribute towards the training of apprentices in our industry. Apprenticeship committees, comprising representatives from the ECA, SAEWA and DoL operated in the major centres and the EDTF's mandate was to fund such training.

I started attending monthly Industrial Council meetings at Salstaff House in Smit Street Braamfontein, representing the Wits branch of the ECA. In those years, we had delegates from Klerksdorp, Pretoria and Vereeniging representing their branches. Carel Venter was the secretary of the Industrial Council in those days. Carel had just served a term of office as Mayor of Johannesburg and was a respected and influential person in the city. He ruled the Industrial Council with an iron fist. His word was law and God forbid if you challenged Carel in a Council meeting.

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Ben Nicholson

This is also where I met Ben Nicholson. Actually, I met Ben many years before when I was an aspiring scrumhalf, playing rugby for Union at the time. Ben Nicholson was a Transvaal Rugby Football Union referee, and nobody liked Ben very much, not because he was strict and blew the whistle for each and every infringement, but because of his habit of trying to coach whilst he refereed the match.

As a trade unionist I respected him. He was a man of integrity and someone you could trust. Ben had an exceptional ability; he could remember all the finer details of what had been discussed in meetings, or that had been agreed upon, and he would remind you if ever you dared question a decision that had been taken at a meeting he had attended. Ben was one of the old-school trade unionists: astute, very diplomatic and cutting the best deal for his members. He defended the rights of workers in many meetings and spoke out strongly against discrimination and exploitation of his members.

Dave Nagin

As I mentioned earlier, recruitment of new members was of paramount importance; and I recall visiting Dave Nagin and recruiting him in his kitchen in the suburb of Lenasia in Johannesburg. Dave was a small contractor at that stage and believed he could benefit from his membership. He often reminded me that he was not given an opportunity to compete in the big league because of his colour and impressed upon the ECA to allow members such as himself to prove their abilities to tender on bigger projects.

Eventually through the intervention of committee members on the Wits Executive, Dave got his chance and he was able to tender on a big project. He told me that he needed only one opportunity to prove he was able to do the work, and the rest, as they say, is history. Dave eventually made a big break and got his first job on a major project. He's never looked back and I'm proud that he ultimately became the president of the ECA(SA) after hard work and dedication. Dave became a major electrical contractor in the Witwatersrand branch and an inspiration to small contractors to face the challenges and prove you can reach your goals if you are prepared to work hard and never stop dreaming.

Robert Jung

The end of the 1983 was approaching, which meant that annual general meetings had to be convened in all the branches under my control. That went smoothly and we all met in Johannesburg for a National Executive Committee (NEC) meeting and national AGM. Robert Jung from Cape Town was elected President of the ECA(SA) and I invited him to be guest speaker at the annual branch dinner, which I had arranged at the El Pescatori Restaurant in Bloemfontein.

It was his first public engagement as President of the ECA(SA) and little did I know what was going to happen. All the arrangements were duly made, hotels booked, and guest lists completed. I received a phone call from Robert on the Saturday morning of the dinner and he asked me whether I had arranged for the press to be present at the dinner. I was flabbergasted. "Why do you need the press?" I asked. Robert made it very clear that he was the President of the ECA(SA) and as it was his first public speaking engagement, he wanted the press plus photographers in attendance that evening. After many frantic phone calls, I eventually found a photographer and someone from the Volksblad newspaper to attend our function at the last minute. Robert was very impressed when I

sent the photographs of him and his beautiful wife, Salome, taken as they arrived at the dinner as our guests of honour. Sadly, Robert died a few years later in Cape Town.

Christmas

One of the ECA traditions in the Witwatersrand branch was that the branch secretary would organise a Christmas party before the annual closing of the industry. It was my duty to arrange the local party and I remember walking the aisles of many toy shops with James Baker, his wife and my wife, to select the presents for the different age groups – from babies up to about 12 years of age. One year, I came upon a brilliant idea: to hire a helicopter to take Father Christmas to the venue. My secretary, Sandy McMillan, suggested that her boyfriend, Bobbie Charlton do the honours as Father Christmas and so she organised a suit for Bobbie to wear on the big day.

I went to Germiston Airport and arranged for a helicopter to pick Bobbie up on the Saturday afternoon and drop him off at the venue. Mothers, fathers and lots of excited children waited expectantly at the venue watching the skies for the helicopter. Sadly, the helicopter never came! The booking that I'd made was never processed and the helicopter pilot knew nothing about the Christmas party. We marched all the kids back into the hall and the sad episode was soon forgotten as the children opened their presents. I exchanged a few harsh words with the charter company on Monday but alas, it was too late.



Lucas, when he started at the ECA in 1983.

Tony McDonald

On one occasion Tony McDonald, a Past President of the Association accompanied me on a trip to Mmabatho. Tony was well-respected in the industry for his knowledge of the Wiring Code as he had represented the ECA on the SABS committee for many years. We travelled together and presented the one-day course. I booked accommodation in a Game Park Lodge for us and that evening after we had dinner, Tony and myself went for a few drinks to discuss the day. On our way back to the chalets much later after having consumed a little too much alcohol, I spotted a lion in the darkness not more than 20 metres away from us. Tony didn't agree, but I was sure it was a lion, I could see the outline and it looked exactly like a lion. The following morning, we looked for the lion only to discover that it was a park bench that we were staring at that night in our intoxicated state!

Tony was instrumental in my development as a person and leader during the 1980s. He'd arranged speakers' circles under the banner of the Knights of Da Gama in Pretoria. I travelled to Pretoria once a week where a group of about 15 ECA members would engage in public speaking. I gained a lot of confidence and overcame my fear of talking to large groups and could stand confidently in front of them and talk on any topic, thanks to Tony for his time and interest in me.

Gus Weich and Wessel van Rensburg

During those early years, I'd invite guest speakers to our general member meetings and, one evening, it was our privilege to welcome Gus Weich, the Chief Inspector from the Department of Labour to our meeting in Vereeniging. Our custom was to present the guest speaker with a small gift at the end of the meeting, but I had unfortunately forgotten about that. While Gus was delivering his speech, I noticed Wessel van Rensburg, our chairman, had his ECA(SA) briefcase with him. I had brought an ECA tie but thought that perhaps it would be good to present Gus with that briefcase as well. So, Wessel and I slipped out, emptied the briefcase of all his personal belongings, cleaned it up and, at the end of the presentation, Wessel handed it over with the tie to the Chief Inspector.

Jim Toms

On another occasion, we had invited Jim Toms, who was a senior official employed at the SABS, to attend and speak at an NEC meeting held at Little Switzerland Resort in the Drakensberg. Jim had a few drinks before his presentation to calm his nerves. He had probably one drink too many. At the end of his presentation as Jim went to sit down the chair somehow fell off the stage with Jim tumbling over backwards, to the great amusement of the audience. We were initially concerned about Jim's wellbeing but thankfully, everything was intact.

Dennis Kneale

Meetings of the NEC, in those years, were held mostly in hotels in different cities across the country. After one meeting at the Johannesburg Hotel in Hillbrow, the delegates relaxed in the pub and a fair volume of liquor was consumed, as was the custom in those days. Our national contractual adviser, Dennis Kneale, left rather late that evening for his home in Edenvale. The next morning Dennis walked into the venue all bandaged up. We thought he'd been in a car accident after he'd left the hotel the previous evening, but later learnt that Dennis had actually fallen down a flight of stairs at home when he got up during the night to go to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Neels van Rooyen and Fanie Steyn

Our recruitment efforts in those early years started to pay dividends and in 1988, the ECA appointed Neels van Rooyen at our Bloemfontein office to take the burden of the Free State and Northern Cape area away from me. Not long after that, we opened an office in Pretoria with Fanie Steyn as its first Regional Director. Fanie had cut his teeth in BIFSA and was probably



Lucas with his PA, Wilmarie Smith, who has been his wing woman for eight years.

the best salesman I had ever met. Fanie could sell membership like no one else in the ECA and, in a very short time, he grew the Gauteng North region into the second largest after the Witwatersrand branch. Fanie and I worked together until his retirement and became very good friends.

Sammy Isaacs and Corlof van der Merwe

NEC meetings were a time for celebration and one of my lasting memories was of the NEC held in the Western Cape. We stayed at the Swiss Farm Excelsior Resort in Franschoek, and it was there that Sammy Isaacs contested the Presidency of the Association against Carlof van der Merwe from the Boland branch. It was a close race and Carlof squeaked in by a small majority. Sammy Isaacs later became the CEO of SAQA and Carlof to my knowledge is happily retired.

AIE

I was privileged to attend a meeting of the AIE in Denmark with James Baker during 1996. South Africa had become a democracy and our colleagues in Europe wanted to hear first-hand how we had adapted to a new style of living after the 1994 general elections. Unfortunately, the ECA budget only paid for one delegate to attend the meeting and the invitation for me to join James Baker was subject to me raising funds for airfare and accommodation. Siemens, a prominent member of the ECA at the time, sponsored my airfare thanks to Billy Batten, Johan Trotskie and Hein Lisse.

NBCEI

My ECA journey also took me to the National Bargaining Council for the Electrical Industry where I served as General Manager for three years. I was asked by the ECA(SA) to go and do that job for a specific purpose and I must confess that when Carl Haberman, then President of the ECA, phoned early in 2002 inviting me to re-join the ECA(SA), I jumped at the opportunity. It was a season in my life that I probably had to go through for my own personal growth and development.

Brandon Abdinor and Chris Greager

A new chapter in the ECA was unfolding. I returned in 2002 to become Regional Director of the Highveld region after a three-year absence. Brandon Abdinor became National Director and he was followed by Chris

Greager, who held this position for 10 years before retiring in 2013. The ECA was now a strong and influential national association looking after the interests of electrical contractors in South Africa. It had grown into an organisation representing more than 3 000 electrical contractors, and with a staff of 50.

A move to the East/South Cape

When Neels van Rooyen retired in 2004, I was offered the position of Regional Director of the East/South Cape region and, on 1 June 2004, a new and exciting adventure started. My wife was extremely pleased as we could leave the hustle and bustle of the city of Johannesburg where we were born. At that time, the Eastern / Southern Cape region was under the control of the Building Bargaining Council. All electrical contractors in the area participated in the Building Bargaining Council structures and their conditions of employment were governed by this Council.

Labour Court ruling

The instruction from ECA(SA) management was clear: 'You can go to the Eastern Cape but go and fix up that situation.' It took many hours of hard work and the recruitment of new members before we could lodge an application to the Labour Court to determine whether or not the Bargaining Council for the Building Industry had, in effect, jurisdiction over the activities of electrical contractors.

We employed a top labour lawyer, John Grogan from Grahamstown, to assist us. Great was the jubilation when the Labour Court award came. The Building Council had been defeated and no longer held sway over electrical contractors. We could do our own thing. We started registering electrical contractors with the National Bargaining Council for the Electrical Industry in our region. Until then, only a few loyal members had paid ECA levies voluntarily, and the region was financially dependent on the ECA's other regions. It was a non-sustainable situation and a non-viable region but after five years of hard work, we celebrated the fact that the Eastern Cape (and later the Southern Cape) was now truly part of the ECA(SA) family of electrical contractors. Our dream of one united group of electrical contractors, all under the ECA(SA) banner, had become true.

New era, new home

A new era dawned for the ECA(SA) in the Eastern Cape. The membership was growing, and we appointed delegates to serve on the National Standing Committees of the Association. For the first time the East/ South Cape's voice was heard at national level and our members felt part of the ECA(SA). We were making an impact in determining national policy and, in 2014, celebrated the inauguration of Michael Straton, a member of the Port Elizabeth branch, as ECA(SA) President.

Although we had established a firm footprint in the Eastern and Southern Cape, we still didn't have a place which we could call our own, but the dream of our own home started to take shape. We generated surpluses for 10 consecutive years from 2005 and when the NEC finally agreed to consider proposals from all the ECA(SA) regions for funding to purchase property, I put together a proposal with great conviction and trusted that NEC would consider it favourably. In 2016, NEC granted us R2,5-million to build our own premises in Port Elizabeth. What a reward for 10 years of hard work!

As I sit back now, a few years into our new dispensation in this region, it is gratifying to see all of us, together as ECA(SA) members, working towards a common goal. Gone are the bad vibes, damaged relationships

and hurtful words expressed between electrical contractors in years gone by. We are now one happy family of electrical contractors in the East/ South Cape region.

I have no regrets, only wonderful memories of all the special people who became part of my life since that day, way back in 1983 when the phone rang, and James Baker asked if I would like to come and work for the ECA(SA). My journey through the ECA has been an unforgettable experience and one that I will cherish forever. The ECA(SA) became part of my life and the people who I have met and friendships that have been established, is something money could never buy. I'm proud of what we have achieved during this time and if I could do it all over again, I would not hesitate for one minute. We've faced many challenges in the past but, looking at the ECA(SA) now, I can honestly say that we have, over the years, improved the situation of the Electrical Contractor in this county, through hard work and lots of dedication.

Graham Clarke, Dave Alcock and Giel Labuschagne

All that is left now, is to thank Graham Clarke and Dave Alcock for the enormous contribution that you, together with outgoing President Giel Labuschagne, have made to the ECA(SA) during your terms of office.

Mark Mfikoe

Mark Mfikoe our National Director, has been an inspiration to me since he took over the reins in 2014, and his energy, innovative thinking, and positive attitude amidst many challenges which came our way recently, has distinguished him as a true leader under whose guidance the ECA(SA) will certainly grow and prosper in the years to come.

This story would not be complete without me giving praise and thanks to my God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, to whom I committed my life on 1 February 1994, and who gave me the talent, wisdom and good health to serve the ECA(SA) to the best of my ability during the past 36 years.

Finally, a big thank you to my lovely wife, Victoria, for her support, love, advice, encouragement and her belief in me to make a success of my life and my career.

My race has been run. I have tried my best.



Lucas will be doing more of this in future...