

Striking against labour broking, e-tolling

Demonstration of workers' power

The 7 March strike to end labour broking and stop the introduction of electronic tolling (e-tolling) on Gauteng's roads, organised by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), and supported by sister federation, the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu), and several civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), can be seen as a demonstration of working-class associational power writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

In early March, thousands of workers from 32 places across the country, heeded the call by Cosatu and took to the streets to demonstrate against labour broking and e-tolling. This show of strength is what Erik Olin Wright describes as working-class associational power, which is made up of 'various forms of power' that comes from 'collective organisations of workers'. In this case the collective organisation of workers under Cosatu.

JOHANNESBURG MARCH

The Johannesburg march could as well have passed for a working-class carnival. There was a lot of whistling and cheering in the crowd while workers who have not seen each other for some time hugged and exchanged greetings. With the usual chit-chat following.

Song and toyi-toyi were the order of the day with popular struggle tunes getting new lyrics to suit the event. Even discordant voices were consumed in the melodies of the march as the workers sang in one voice.

A truck with a public address system was on standby to amplify the sound, with the deejay

constantly being reminded to play appropriate songs.

The dress code of the day was jeans, t-shirts and takkies. Preferably a red shirt, red head bands, but they were other colours too. Like yellow, the popular colour for Nactu, and blue if you were from Sasbo, the finance union.

There were thousands of posters and several banners all condemning labour broking and e-tolling. The posters in a sense announced the presence of the many organisations that were taking part such as the South African Communist Party (SACP), the African National Council Youth League (ANCYL), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and others.

The march had a jovial crowd that was increasingly young. Not surprising as broking affects mostly young workers in their 20s especially women.

When time for speeches came you couldn't move an inch. The street was jam packed, so you remained rooted to the spot. Workers listened to the speeches attentively, hoping that they would not be long, and were not disappointed.

Said Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi: 'We led the struggle. It cannot be a better life

for some; it should be a better life for all. We are reminding those who do not know the powers of the working class.'

WRONG PRIORITY

There was unity among the unions on the stay away. For example, the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (Satawu) called on its members and all South African workers to reject e-tolls, which it described as privatisation of public roads. Other unions did the same.

'The tolling of the Gauteng freeways is a new revenue system created by government and will never cease or decrease once implemented. This massive multi-billion rand expenditure on freeways was a wrong priority. We agree with government that all future South African National Roads Agency Limited (Sanral) freeway and tolling projects must be put on hold and thoroughly reassessed,' read a Satawu statement. Installing the tolling system cost R20-billion.

'Tolling Gauteng roads is an infringement of our right to movement and similar to the apartheid pass system. The system also denies the poor worker the ability to afford and own a vehicle.



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If toll fees are expensive, the poor cannot afford travelling in their own cars. By taking away their motivation, you take away the motivation to work harder.'

'We continue to call on the government to prioritise the achievement of safe, reliable, accessible, integrated and affordable public transport instead of being obsessed with elite projects such as toll gates that do nothing but enrich a few at the expense of the majority including workers,' added the union, which is calling for improved public transport in the form of buses and trains.

Satawu also demanded the banning of labour brokers who are causing havoc in the cleaning sector where it is organising. In this sector workers are poorly paid.

'We remain utterly opposed to the practice of labour brokering, a form of human trafficking, which has condemned thousands of workers to insecure jobs with poverty pay, no benefits and no job security,' added Satawu.

The National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) added to the chorus. 'This militant show of worker power was a reminder to our government and

big business that workers will not tolerate exploitation by the parasitic elite. Workers are calling for the implementation of the progressive Polokwane resolutions and 2009 ANC manifesto priorities that were overwhelmingly endorsed by the electorate. The South African workforce that gallantly fought and defeated the oppressive apartheid regime has made it categorically clear that there are lines they will not allow both government and capitalists to cross.'

Nehawu did not want regulation of labour brokers, but a total ban. 'It is disheartening for workers to witness this sudden flip flop by the ANC-led government that had previously promised to totally ban labour brokers. The new proposal of a tighter regulation of these super exploiters is a gross betrayal of the workers' who find themselves stripped of their constitutional rights, and it makes a mockery of the Labour Relations Act. These modern-day slave traders need to be banned not regulated,' said Nehawu.

BATTLE OF IDEAS

However, this power was challenged by the ruling ANC, which commented on the eve of the strike

that e-tolling would proceed as planned.

It was not only the ANC that challenged the working-class power. Jeremy Cronin, the deputy minister of Transport and deputy general secretary of the SACP wrote in *Umsebenzi Online*, the party's publication, justifying why the tolls were being introduced. He argued that tolling made it possible to maintain roads and construction costs without getting money from the government purse, therefore making money available for other purposes such as health and education.

Sanral would borrow money using the roads as collateral and bigger vehicles such as trucks would pay more than smaller cars. There would also be congestion charges and making tolled roads free at certain hours of the night.

'So does this mean that Cosatu and other progressive formations are wrong to be raising serious concerns about the Gauteng Freeway Infrastructure Project and e-tolling? The answer is a resounding: No. However, the basis on which Cosatu has raised many of its concerns, and the solutions offered (basically: 'dismantle the e-toll gantries') don't

helpfully take us forward either,' argued Cronin.

Not everybody agreed to his views. In response Irvin Jim, general secretary of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa said his views showed 'ideological confusion.'

'Cosatu's view is that the user pays principle should not be used on public goods and essential goods that are produced by the public sector,' argued Jim, explaining that pricing should be redistributive and 'sensitive to the deep inequalities that are embedded in our society. In other words, the pricing of such items should shift resources from the upper classes to the lower classes.'

Jim advocated for progressive taxation that taxed the richer more and for government to work towards providing reliable public transport. He also argued that the value of goods was determined by the labour content of the commodity and not the weight, and that some of Cronin's suggestions sounded more like coming from a consultant and what he called 'consultant speak'.

Jim's response means that Cosatu uses working-class power not only to stand up to government but, to its Alliance partners, the ANC and the SACP as well.

SYMBOLIC POWER

Studies on working-class power in South Africa by Karl Von Holdt and Eddie Webster have concluded that it makes sense to discuss working-class associational power by taking into account that it was part of symbolic power as the two were linked. Symbolic power was broader in that it included other social rights.

'We use the concept of symbolic power to conceptualise a sphere of public and symbolic contestation, a sphere which is entered with forms of action such as street marches as well as with discursive strategies that emphasise social and citizenship rights, not only worker rights.'

'Symbolic power is constituted in the public sphere, and elaborates on images and ideas which resonate with community and public consciousness,' argue Webster and Von Holdt.

They further argue that symbolic power 'may provide new sources of power to labour movements battling with the loss of older and more traditional sources of power in the labour market or the workplace.'

In relation to the strike it means Cosatu also had symbolic power as seen in making demands that were broader than the shop floor.

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY ECONOMY

Cosatu has been reaching informal sector workers and has the support from organisations of street vendors and informal traders such as StreetNet International. This can be seen as a demonstration of its symbolic power.

'StreetNet International believes that labour brokers only intensify the vulnerability of workers in the informal economy. Workers find themselves working under highly exploitative conditions for labour brokers who feed off the desperation of the working poor,' said StreetNet in a solidarity statement.

According to StreetNet the informal economy needed strengthening. 'It is more appropriate to put resources and energy into transforming the informal economy into a strengthened Social Solidarity Economy whose values are consistent with the objectives of social inclusion, decent work, training and reintegration of disadvantaged persons.'

The solidarity economy is made up of social innovation and collective solutions to social problems. It also supports quality of family life by giving workers 'the capability of taking care of their minor children and older relatives in a non-discriminatory environment of equality for all,' added StreetNet.

StreetNet also dismissed the idea of trying to regulate broking. 'We call on government to work together with all workers in the formal as well as the informal sectors of the economy to build a sustainable Social Solidarity Economy in which people are more important than profits.'

Ecurment Celik has described the relationship between Cosatu and street vendors and informal traders, using Peter Waterman's term of social movement unionism. Celik argues that it is important for federations like Cosatu to engage

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‘the movement of the marginalised labour force’ of workers from the informal economy. Arguably workers who work under broking arrangements are also part of the marginalised workers.

Social movement unionism is not new in South Africa and there have been studies on the issue by Karl Von Holdt and others. Rob Lambert and Eddie Webster argued for the forging of an alliance between the labour movement and the popular (the ANC and the local anti-apartheid community) movements in 1988. This means that a leaf can be drawn from the past that can be useful in the present. However, it is important to take into account the changed context.

According to Celik, the strength of social movement unionism lies in its concern with labour as a ‘social and political force, not simply a commodity to be bargained over.’ Therefore, labour concerns should go beyond the shop floor and include issues of democracy and workers’ control of the means of production.

Support also came from social justice organisations such as SECTION27, which uses the law to protect social and economic rights.

‘We are heartened by the wide support the strike is attracting

from other trade union federations and civil society organisations that campaign for social justice. We hope that this new alliance for justice and dignity will carry forward into the future.’

‘Poverty, high unemployment and the global economic crisis should not be used as excuses to attack labour rights, or to draw people into employment without rights, dignity, job security or minimum wages.’

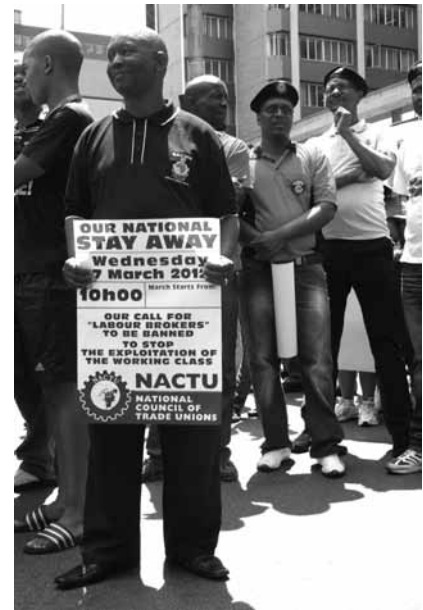
‘We believe the strike aims to draw a line across attempts to place increasing economic burdens on the poor, the working class and even the middle classes, whilst the rich in our society get richer and inequality grows wider’, read a SECTION27 statement.

LOSS OF ORGANISATIONAL POWER

Sakhela Buhlungu argues that the federation had more political than organisational power: ‘An appraisal of the federation’s activities shows that the workers movement, in general, and Cosatu in particular, are facing contradictory processes of increasing political power, on the one hand, and diminishing organisational power on the other.’

He attributes this to the brain drain of unionists to government and the private sector. He continues: ‘However, since the beginning of the democratic transition, unions have been losing organisational power as hundreds of leaders have left for politics and business, thousands of shop floor activists and leaders have been promoted out of the union, and the vibrancy of the movement has been sapped by the effects of class formation and global economic restructuring.’

Cosatu’s response to Buhlungu was livid describing his analysis as ‘outrageous allegations’. Among other things, Cosatu denied that it had organisational weaknesses and tensions, and that its membership was declining. Instead, it argued that its membership was growing.



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‘Cosatu has always been a democratic, transparent and worker-controlled organisation, always willing to accept and debate constructively critical views. We can always do better and are constantly reviewing all aspects of our work.’

CONCLUSION

The Cosatu strike against labour broking and e-tolling is a demonstration of working-class power. It is also a demonstration of symbolic power of the trade union movement because of the support it drew from other sections of society such as the informal traders and street vendors, as well as the youth and NGOs. This working-class associational power allows Cosatu to square up to its partners in the Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and SACP.

Working-class power also operates on the basis of challenges based on ideas and the trade union is not found wanting either. However, although Cosatu wields this power some studies have argued that this political power might not necessarily be an indication that the organisation is internally strong. ¹⁸

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