

that of Victor Jarra who sang revolutionary songs at the time of repression by the junta of Pinochet that toppled the democratically elected Popular Unity government of Salvador Allende through the assistance of the Americans and their Central Intelligence Agency. He had his hands chopped by the military in one of the most atrocious crimes committed against the Chilean people. After chopping his hands, the perpetrators threw the guitar at him to continue to sing and laughed at him as he couldn't play and sing for the most obvious reasons. He was later shot and killed. In a further display of brutality, the master tape of his songs was also destroyed so that there is no trace of his legacy. Chilean songs therefore became the epicenter of the international solidarity movement with the Chilean people against repression.

In South Africa, one cannot help but remember how one Jessica Sherman, more than three decades ago, strummed her guitar and sang revolutionary songs in praise of ZIPRA (the former armed wing of the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union) and Frelimo (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) during the gatherings of the fledgling mass democratic movement. This was in the wake of Mozambique's independence in 1978 and followed by Zimbabwe in 1980. The national liberation projects of the two countries, served as a source of inspiration for both Namibia and South Africa which finally broke the shackles of apartheid colonialism in 1990. It is these kinds of artistic examples that are missing in today's gatherings of the progressive movement. ^{LB}

Busang Moiloo is a former head of secretariat at the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union and is active in arts and culture.

History of worker choirs

Although worker choirs were part of the trade union movement's struggle against apartheid they found themselves in a new terrain after democracy in 1994, **Busang Moiloo** traces their role during this transition.

After the Durban strikes that followed in the wake of the banning of the PAC and the ANC in the 1960s, pressure mounted further, especially after the 1976 riots, on the apartheid state to introduce reform. This led to the Wiehahn Commission that legalised independent trade unions that organised mostly African workers. This development culminated in the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu)'s (Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu)'s precursor) in 1979. Another development was the coming together of a multi-sectoral organisation in the form of youth, civic, sports and various voluntary sector organisations, which spawned the United Democratic Front in 1984. The form of organisation that took shape during this time galvanised itself in a way that had a great impact from the mid-1980s and later, on the political landscape of the struggle by organised labour and political mass formations such as the UDF. Culture became an 'arena of struggle' through song, posters, theatre, and poetry, dance and so on. Unions were not left behind.

CASE OF FOSATU

Fosatu not only raised shop floor and broader community issues like evictions, but also started worker choirs among various industrially organised affiliates such as the Transport and General Workers Union (GWU), Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), and Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). The affiliates which had worker choirs and cultural groups recorded the historic stellar album under the title *Fosatu worker choirs*. This album, recorded by the independent Shifty Records was a milestone in the history of the trade union movement and its struggles for a better South Africa. It is a pity that because it was only available on vinyl, it has not been re-issued on a CD format. Downloads are nevertheless available on the Internet.

In their approach to present their music not only to its affiliated membership but to the broad listenership in South Africa, Fosatu worker choirs used styles steeped in the tradition of *iscathamiya*, *mbube*, and the popular song. This should barely be surprising because most



Numsa theatre group in action.

of these styles were also employed by cultural groups in hostels and compounds where migrant workers resided in most cities of South Africa. Part of the hit parade of songs included a paean sung by CWIU workers employed by SASOL 1 and 2 after being re-instated following the Transvaal stay-away in 1984 called by the unions and community organisations to protest against price increases and the worsening in the standard of living.

These SASOL workers choirs could be mistaken for the Grammy Award winning Ladysmith Black Mambazo as they celebrated their show of workers' power by re-claiming their jobs and dignity. The power of song was in this case used to celebrate worker power in addressing national issues that were relevant to the welfare of workers and their communities. Not to be outdone were Kellogg's workers near Springs in the East Rand. This is where the late worker leader, African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) activist and later a diplomat Chris Dlamini worked.

If one had an opportunity to see the Kellogg's workers perform, one would be treated to rare talent. The choristers who called themselves the K-Team would not only sing but employ a Zulu *indlamu* choreography as they twisted and turned in a well coordinated and rhythmic movement that jolted many into bursts of ululation and whistling

as a sign of appreciation and joining into the spirit of the music. Apart from dancing, which they were extremely good at, the unique choir would also pay tribute to the death of a worker leader Andries Raditsela who was murdered by the apartheid police.

There was also the Mooi River Textile workers choir in KwaZulu-Natal. The lyrics of their work songs raised hopes about the future whose achievements we are now celebrating. The workers of Transport and General Workers Union also loved singing. They called their union T&G and they would also not allow themselves to be left behind in adding their melodic voices to those of the federation's other choirs. In a typical *iscathamiya* style, they would explode into song to praise their union as not only building unity of transport workers in South Africa but throughout the world.

Once-again, the power of song captures the feeling of workers about internationalism. Not only are they alone in South Africa in their struggles, but are part and parcel of the workers' movement world-wide. There were other album songs such as *Senzeni na* as belted by the I & J choir and *Sibingelela u Fosatu* by the Clover choir. Those within progressive circles, who still have this album in their possession, regard it as a collector's item.

Moses Mayekiso and youth leader Oupa Monareng were some of the leaders arrested during the stay-away

of 1984 in the then province of the Transvaal (now Gauteng). Support groups drawn from a wide-spectrum of progressive organisations would often organise solidarity meetings to raise funds and mobilise for support. Worker choirs would often perform during these events that upped the ante in terms of highlighting the struggles of workers and communities at both national and international level. A song like BB Myataza's *Umzi wa seAfrica* would be rendered by a community-based choir in support meetings to condemn repression of the apartheid state.

Besides, Fosatu always had a mosaic of performances during its activities. An array of activities which formed part of the federation's education workshops would often be marked by a rich tapestry of praise poets like Mi Hlatswayo, Alfred Qabula and Nise Malange, traditional dances and other cultural troupes like choirs themselves. Unfortunately, the last Fosatu education workshop scheduled for Jabulani Amphitheatre in Soweto, was called off when the first state of emergency was declared in May 1986.

MAWU AND BTR SARMCOL EXPERIENCE

Creative energy continued being sapped by various forms of struggles in the trade union movement. One such remarkable struggle is that of the BTR Sarmcol workers from Mpupumeni in Howick, KwaZulu-Natal also in the 1980s. To cushion against idleness after a dismissal following a strike action for higher wages workers organised a play called the *Long March* to portray trials and tribulations of their struggles to be re-instated. Their cultural troupe under Mawu went on a national tour and performed in different township venues and halls.

Their cooperative which was formed in the wake of the strike went to record an album of songs workers composed called *Bambatha's Children*. The

combative and immortal spirit of the Bambatha rebellion of 1906 continued to inspire another generation of worker militants in the 1980s. It is amazing that without much financial muscle, workers managed to organise themselves into such a dynamic cultural melting pot.

WHEN JOE MAVI DIED

When Joe Mavi, one of the most outstanding worker leaders of the erstwhile Johannesburg Municipal Workers Union (Samwu's precursor) died in the early 1980s following a car accident, mourners gathered at Regina Mundi to pay their last respects to this venerable and fearless leader. The mourners from his home region of the Eastern Cape composed two special songs in memory to his contribution to the trade union movement and the liberation struggle. A procession that ushered his body inside the Church sang a dirge, *U Mavi o li qhawe* as a tribute to a man who, with the likes of Gatsby Mazwi and the late Phillip Dlamini, led one of the most militant municipal strikes in the history of the trade unions under apartheid.

Another song of a similar title further praised Mavi for his heroism and called for a government of social welfare where workers have a greater role in how society is structured. It is incumbent upon the current generation of Samwu leaders and workers to remember leaders such as Mavi who led a union which with others such as the Cape Town Municipal Workers, merged into Samwu and were part of the unity talks that led to the formation of Cosatu. It is important for current leaders to remember a library of songs such as those that were composed in memory of Mavi to connect with a rich history of heroic struggles.

REPRESSION STIFLES CREATIVITY

The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by more state repression especially in townships. The mid and later parts of the 1980s were

marked by two successive states of emergency while in the 1990s, especially in the wake of the unbanning of the ANC, the PAC and so on, repression took the form of low-intensity conflict in the form of the so-called black-on-black violence. Meetings and many activities became increasingly difficult and the noble idea of worker choirs in the unions faded and finally ceased. The merger of unions that gave rise to Cosatu might also have contributed new traditions as cultural groups such as Mayibuye from Kagiso and the Mzwakhe Mbuli inspired *Kbwangano* in Soweto took over for a short while as a form of replacement. These kinds of groups which led to the setting up of the UDF cultural desk, performed at various events, rallies of the mass democratic movement including union conferences of the newly formed federation Cosatu. In fact, the performance of *Imilonji ka Ntu* led by George Mxadana at the inaugural launch of the federation, showed a traditional style that has been part of the trade union movement for decades.

TOWARDS REVIVALISM

Ever since the democratic elections of 1994, significant improvements have markedly been recorded in housing, electrification, water provision and the social safety net through grants. Fairly progressive legislations like the Labour Relations Act and Employment Equity Act have been enacted to help protect and improve the workers' conditions. However, the federation has had to grapple with challenges of globalisation as seen in liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation. This has had a negative impact in the general living and working conditions of workers and the vast majority of the poor. It is a storm that it has had to weather in its difficult road with Alliance partners in the ANC and the SACP.

In respect of worker choirs, it is interesting to note that over

the last decade or so, choirs have re-emerged among Cosatu's affiliates especially the public sector unions which were some of the last sectors to be organised and which have grown significantly in the last 20 years. In addition, there has been a long-standing tradition of choirs in the schools for the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) and in the case of the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru), both in the South African Police Service and Correctional Services alike. Both unions were also instrumental in Cosatu's *Solidarity Forever* project which was initiated to honour the contribution of South African musicians such as Hugh Masekela, Busi Mhlongo and groups such as Bayete for their contribution to the struggle of workers for national liberation.

Both Popcru's and Sadtu's worker choirs featured prominently in the lead song *Solidarity Forever*. This project symbolised the need to revive a tradition that disappeared from the life of the trade union movement in South Africa. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) is already moving in this direction and a choir which is part of a cultural and sports wing has already been set up. A lot needs to be done to spread the idea of worker choirs in an organised manner. Re-defining arts and culture as part and parcel of the union life should be re-visited. Thus the resilience of Sadtu and Popcru choirs is something worth celebrating and learning from as they have been involved to some extent in activities of the Alliance and some progressive labour-related service organisations such as Development Institute for Training Support and Education for Labour (Ditsela). They have often performed at major events of Alliance partners to add colour and glamour and they also sing traditional songs associated with struggles of socialist and communist movements such as the *Internationale* and the *Red Flag*.

NEW CHALLENGES

Cosatu moved into the 1990s and beyond under new conditions. The reality and material conditions that the federation operated changed dramatically under the new dispensation.

Firstly and historically, the trade union movement was to a large extent a recipient of international solidarity because of apartheid. Under the new conditions, the labour movement has to come to terms with the challenge of not just being given but also to give. Apart from the normal sharing of experiences regarding labour market issues, workers can also share songbooks, memorabilia, ideas such as workers' libraries, museums and so on. This can help foster a worker identity in a region like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and elsewhere on the continent and world. As issues of integration continue to be discussed, could cultural activities such as the need for worker choirs strike relevance as part of the general efforts for unity? Should workers adopt some of the songs sung by their counterparts in neighbouring countries such as Botswana, Namibia and Zimbabwe? Could this be possible in respect of Cuba, Brazil, Greece, Korea or Nigeria irrespective of the language barrier?

Certainly, possibilities do exist but they need to be explored. During the Council of Unions of South Africa (Cusa) epoch which is the national federation that came before the National Council of Trade unions (Nactu), part of the tradition of songs sung, were taken from the songbook of the American trade union movement. Earlier links of Cusa with American unions like the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFCSME) and international trade secretariats should have had an influence. Songs such as *Vive la mor*, *Solidarity Forever*, and *Union maid* form part of this tradition.

Secondly, various affiliates have through increased subscriptions and membership, generated significant funds that have fostered financial self-sufficiency. Unions have also used funds generated from workers' subscriptions to start union investment companies. This generation of income is a far cry from the days of the 1980s when the trade union movement was hardly financially self-sufficient. The cash injection has great potential to fuel a machinery of arts and culture to a higher level in the unions

As more choirs continue to take root among affiliates, there should be more possibilities of recordings such as CDs, CR-Roms, DVDs and Internet downloads given the advantages of modern technology. The existence of such resources can assist to put on the landscape of unions, the possibilities of organising working people's festivals in celebrating May Day. It is in events like these that exchanges of worker choir experiences can be encouraged with neighbouring countries as part of a strategy to build a common class consciousness among workers. Workers can also assert their nationhood by tapping into their national treasures and heritage.

Although small in numerical strength, the Creative Workers Union (CWU) has been accepted as a Cosatu affiliate. This union, apart from its struggles to have the creative industry regulated and speaking truth to power when it is necessary is comprised of cultural workers. Deriving part of Cosatu's membership from the community of artists, should add and contribute to an important chapter in the vibrancy of Cosatu from the viewpoint of arts and culture and also strengthen the mass membership.

One idea could be to commission one of the current masters to compose an epic song about the contribution of workers in our struggle for liberation and for a better future. This will be similar to a tribute and traditional praise epic

that Professor Mzilikazi Khumalo penned in memory of Shaka ka Senzangakhona. Furthermore, the recent tragic and unfortunate massacre of workers in Marikana has generated the need for national healing. Plans were afoot by musicians led by Sello Chicco Thwala and the CWU to embark on a project that will support the victims of the tragedy. In this way, arts and culture will take a formally organised direction within Cosatu and its affiliates.

Unlike during apartheid, the trade union movement is operating under conditions that are not hostile. In the past, institutions such as universities and progressive support organisations such as workers' libraries were just about the few to give support in terms of information, material use and research. Under the new dispensation, government-sponsored institutions such as the National Heritage Council can also provide opportunities for collaboration with the union movement in preserving songs of yesteryear, for present and future use. The gamut of songs that members and choirs of the ICU sang can be an interesting case study especially if the records exist. Despite some of the songs being overtly political, the early *mbube* choirs of the 1940s such as the Evening Birds, ironically enjoyed airplay on some South African Broadcasting Corporation stations in Durban.

In ensuring that the heritage of such songs does not become erased from the pages of our history, their use can therefore be part of a struggle of social memory against forgetting. An initiative of this nature can further deepen the contribution of the progressive trade union movement and state institutions in the struggle for social transformation. In this way, workers and the trade union movement can continue to weave tapestries of their struggles through a heritage of songs. ¹⁸