

Writing new songs

South African workers should write new songs that reflect the everyday struggles of their time, writes **Busang Moiloa**. This is not a difficult task as the working class has a rich history of such songs, poems and cultural performances.

South African workers, despite singing new songs that reflect the celebration of the new post-1994 order, as well as the contradictions that have accompanied the new society can further come of age and reach greater heights of aligning themselves with the global struggle against capitalism. Songs can be a way to identify with the struggle of workers elsewhere in the world.

The song *Solidarity Forever* was composed by an American poet, author and a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, Ralph Chaplin, in 1915. Its melody is derived from an American folk song of patriotism *The battle hymn of the Republic* which was composed by Julia Ward Howe during the American Civil War in 1861. The former song still reverberates as one of the most popular to be composed in North America on the workers' struggle. One of its stanzas goes in the following way:

*It is we who ploughed the fields
Built the cities where they trade
Dug the mines
And build the workshops
Endless miles of railroad laid
Now we stand outcast and
starving
Midst the wonders we have made
But the union makes us strong*

Chaplin was certainly inspired and spoke his mind through a creative composition. Apparently the inspiration flowed from a strike action by workers in the Virginia area around the time. *Solidarity Forever* has since been adopted as one of the international anthems of workers that have been sung over years across the globe.

In the case of the *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (The May 1st Movement) which is one of the major national trade union centres in the Philippines, and the entire progressive movement such as the multi-sectoral *Bakong Alyansang Makabayan* (New People's Alliance), the famous Latin American song *El Pueblo* (The people), which originates from the popular struggles in Chile in the early 1970s, has been translated into a local dialect Tagalog. The Filipino people and workers had at some stage of their subjugation fallen under Spanish domination in their struggles for independence and freedom. In this way, they join their counterparts in Latin America to invoke popular power and energy in musical expression and against the scourge of domination and exploitation.

It is these kinds of creative innovations that can help workers to identify with their struggles and that of progressive forces in Latin

America and elsewhere. One will not believe that Philipino workers complete their rendition of *El Pueblo* with a South African slogan *Amandla Ngawethu* (Power to the people!). Yes, one would be surprised that a South African liberation slogan would reverberate in the Gulag Archipelago in the far east of the global village. Such is the seriousness and the umbilical link of the 'Internationale that unites the human race'. Therefore if Phillipino workers can translate *El Pueblo* into Tagalog, South African workers can equally do the same or even surpass this example. If progressive forces can see it fit to chant a South African slogan so far away, we are equally capable of doing the same. After all, the struggles of workers are inter-dependent and unity should therefore be fostered in all the terrains of struggles including the cultural one.

WORKER CHOIRS

The availability of resources through investment companies can help spur the choirs that can perform during union, Alliance and other meetings of progressive organisations held as part of the cultural arm of the entire trade union movement. Available funds can also help record choirs as part of the history of workers'

movement in South Africa. The concept of a mass choir can also be replicated during important events such as the anniversary of unions, opening of buildings, funerals, congresses and so on. An initiative of this nature might look peripheral but can have a lasting legacy on the contribution of unions in building an authentic culture of workers, the people of South Africa and beyond.

Including in the songbook, old classics composed by the masters should be interesting in terms of re-defining and understanding arts and culture in the trade union movement and in a broader social context. A song like *Linoto* by JP Mohapeloa can easily form part of National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa)'s repertoire because its vocal lyrics are about health and safety in a metal factory called BMS (British Mining Society) that produces steel for the mines. Moreover, a love song here and there should strike relevance with the book's repertory. After all, part of the leisure time that workers spend is with their loved ones. Needless to say, in the midst of growing inequalities in South Africa, Harry Gwala's *Our Suffering* should still resonate in the trenches of struggle and among those who are opposed to labour brokers and hanker for a more equitable society. The following lyrics of Gwala's song cannot therefore pale into significance, many years after he has passed on as one of the great leaders of the working class and the people of South Africa.

*Our suffering
Is the suffering of the people
Our suffering
Is the suffering of the workers
We are the workers
Soldiers clothing at war
We are the people
Soldiers clothing at war
Waging the struggle
For the class oppressed for
thousands of years*

If not already, SBP Mnomiya is one among many contemporary composers who will endear himself in the annals of choral music in South Africa. As part of his oeuvre, he has already made his mark with spine-chilling songs such as *Ibele*, *Ukuble Kwethu* and *Siyabonga* which are quite popular among choirs. The song *Siyabonga* in particular, captures the essence of how far we have come and the challenges that still confront us as a nation. It is this song that further pays tribute to our struggle icons for their contribution to nation building and equally advocates for a vision that will take us forward. Clearly, we can only foretell our future by genuinely addressing the triple challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality especially for the working-class masses.

It is not utopian to imagine a mass choir during an event like the May Day rally, either by one affiliate or with others together, exploding into a volcanic eruption of voices that sing in unison to reach the stratosphere. A *tour-de-force* akin to what Afro-American historian and scholar Carter G Woodson, said can 'move humanity to repentance'. Activities of this nature can assist a great deal in helping to combat the domination in the cultural sphere, by trans-nationals which are not interested in fostering a popular culture.

USING ARTS TO FIGHT AFROPHOBIA

Of all the countries on the African continent, South Africa is the most westernised. Trade unions can therefore play an influential role in the cultural re-awakening of workers and society. One way to address this challenge is to explore the presence of a sizeable number of migrant workers from the rest of the African continent in South Africa, to use the arts as a vehicle to combat Afrophobia. Suffice it to say that workers and the populace can get to know more about the cultures of the continent and its

people that most South Africans were denied the right to know in the past.

The proceedings of most meetings are interspersed by the singing of revolutionary songs. Worker choirs are a special part and parcel of this tradition. With South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru) and Numsa having shown some signs of reviving this art form in the trade union movement, the other affiliates should consider following suit in initiating choirs and cultural troupes of their own.

Although a lot has changed in the landscape of trade unions in South Africa, re-issuing of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu)'s workers' choir album should help enhance the storage of institutional memory of the trade union movement in relation to the current challenges. It is almost 30 years ago that Fosatu recorded this album and what should be borne in the minds of the current generations of trade unionists is whether this track-record can be surpassed in accordance with the reality of the new millennium.

Any view of contemporary choir's performance in South Africa is in some instances accompanied by an orchestra. Could this be a possibility in today's nascent choirs of the trade union movement? Could this be a bourgeois tendency within the working class? Only time will tell! Amandla Cultural Ensemble also produced epoch-making recordings that were mostly available when the ANC was banned. Although produced at different phases of the struggle, their availability as part of keeping our collective memory can help spur comrades into a new wave of creativity. The equality court should therefore not punish workers and comrades for possessing and appropriately using them because they are an important part of our struggle history! Re-issuing the



Workers' choirs such as the Kellogg's Team have played an important part in the trade union movement.

BTR Sarmcol worker songs on a CD format should also be viewed in this light. Of course downloads are a vogue and medium that should not be ignored.

There is a need to dig deep into history about songs that were sung in the past. For instance, a song *What a system* was popular in the ranks of the SACP and unions such as the General and Allied Workers Union (Gawu) in the early years. One of its stanzas goes like this:

What a system (3X)

What a crime

*We can't mend it, we must end it
End it now and for all time
Up above the mining compound
As he joins the picket line
He is the labour agitator
And his life is not worth a dime!*

It is songs like these that should be re-visited. After many years of struggles, of victories and setbacks, the message and melodies still haunt the capitalist system. It is these type of songs that are not

going to be on Top 10 of the money spinning charts. It is songs about strength and hope for the future. As the world continues to plunge into an economic crisis of unsustainable levels at global level, this song could have not been more relevant than now!

CONCLUSION

These are the type of activities that union members like young workers, as well as the non-unionised will be looking forward to as they continue to swell the ranks of organised labour such as the public, metal, mining sectors and so on. It is one way of looking at different and dynamic tools of organising and education.

Reviving a cultural desk possibly as part and parcel of the education department at the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) can help propel the federation to contribute greatly towards the cultural revival. If proper capacity is built, the revival and its impact will certainly assume a mass character.

One perspective is to explore how radio and television stations can help to ensure that worker choirs receive sufficient viewership and airplay. Surely, this can be one way of pouring a libation to the likes of Solomon Linda and his cohorts. We owe it to the struggle for improved working and living conditions to reclaim our culture from the dragons of profit, and to build a society of equality and social justice. Taking into account the heritage of all the protean styles and expressions of choirs and the revolutionary song, we should already be clearing our throats, opening our lungs and singing with our loud voices as one way to re-imagine and strive for a new world order. As in a stanza of OR Tambo's *Umkhonto*, '*Ba phume bonke abazebenzi, ba ilweli inkululeko yethu*'.¹⁸

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