

Cosatu promises a return to basics

The 11th Congress of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) lived up to the expectation of being a theatre of opposing positions almost on all issues that affect the post-1973 Durban strike unions. Probably the only exception comes from the *Secretariat Organisational Report*, writes **Mojalefa Musi**.

The *Organisational Report* raised a wide range of issues and honestly dealt with many of the observable weaknesses of the trade union movement generally and Cosatu specifically. This report for me harked back to the contradictory location of trade unions under capitalism: the system places limits and possibilities. SakhelaBuhlungu calls it 'a paradox of victory' which confirms as the report shows that trade unions were caught in an endless cycle of long-term setbacks and short-term victories in most cases. This shows some of the problems trade unions face under capitalism.

The comments I make on the *Organisational Report* do not intend to cover the broad issues raised, but make initial general comments from the perspective of an education officer of a trade union with the hope that other comrades in the National Education Committee (Nedcom) will add their views to this debate.

CHANGING IDEAS OF UNION DEMOCRACY

Eddie Webster and David Ginsburg in their *Taking democracy seriously* tried to offer an understanding of the different versions of democracy between

the parliamentary representative democracy and the trade union 'popular' or participatory democracy. The point of this comparison is that parliamentary democracy uses regular elections of public representatives as 'custodians' of the voice of the people. Once the mandate is given, the leadership of organisations (political parties and trade unions) has a responsibility to advocate the views of those who elected them.

In broad political life, this has been what has been accepted in how political parties relate to the mandate they receive from the populace. The dangers of this have been part of the shifting dynamics, mostly negative, in our country's politics. Participatory democracy is a direct version of democratic practice where there is tight mechanism of control and accountability by the electing populace.

There is also the right to recall when the wishes of the electorate are not met. This has been the emerging feature of internal union democracy and to a great extent this is in opposition to the view of democracy of broad democratic forces that were common before the collapse of apartheid in 1994.

The democratic forces then

motivated many activists and writers such as Liv Torres and Steven Friedman writing in different times to characterise trade unions as 'laboratories of democracy'. The conclusion has been that parliamentary democracy as we have come to understand it is incompatible with participatory democracy from which the dynamic post-1973 radical trade unionism emerged.

Despite attempts at different times by scholars and activists, labour studies seem to undermine the tension that exists within trade unions between the movement towards representative democracy and the affirmation of participatory democracy within radical trade unions after 1994. The *Organisational Report* also glosses over the shift and does not discuss that in essence Cosatu is swaying away from one version of democracy to another.

There have been policy advances and Cosatu has developed the capacity of reorganising social power in the context of social corporatism that is represented by a multi-layered institutional mechanism such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac), which is the highpoint of such an approach.



Delegates at Cosatu Congress pay attention to discussions.

All this meant that Cosatu had to modify its internal democratic practices to advance the struggle on a different terrain, as Buhlungu continuously remarks. This is the essence of the shift referred to above.

Most scholars confirm this positive posture of the trade union federation. However, Bashier Vally, in *Social contract: A way forward?* makes a compelling case for the fact that, while all the positive advances made in social corporatism could be celebrated, it distorts democracy and blurs the long-held socialist vision of the labour movement. The jury is still out on whether the federation's socialist vision is not blurred and off-sighted.

The Organisational Report, to the credit of the federation leadership, points out that internal union democracy is in a state of radical decline at-least from the

perspective of direct participatory democracy as said above. It attributes this to a number of factors including but not limited to centralisation of union operations and the culture troubling the union movement of not seeking regular mandates from workers, lack of service and attention to the needs of workers, and the need to jack up capacity of union officials such as shop stewards and leaders.

However, the missing point is how union organisation, at all levels, has seemingly swallowed the logic of representative democracy and adopted the way it operates. However, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) survey findings which glibly find expression in the report, assert that Cosatu is still considerably democratic with members confirming that they are generally satisfied with their union and find shop stewards useful.

This underscores the point that Cosatu is considered the only hope of the working class in relation to organisational capacity and the content and character of its campaigns. However, the federation is certainly shifting lanes rather swiftly and this has implications for its role as a powerful voice in society.

LINKING ACTIVITIES

Cosatu assesses its progress or lack of it using its 2015 Plan as a yardstick. It places essential goals for the union federation and boldly targets four million members in the next three years. This includes how Cosatu should be situated organisationally and politically. However, both the 2015 Plan and draft resolutions are not strong on the workplace as a site of struggle where broader class struggles should be waged. Unfortunately, the links are not often made between

this site of class struggle and on-going struggles that are being waged in communities. However, the report does sharply point out that this area of union organising has been weak for a variety of reasons. Therefore, a congress declaration sought to rescue this by pledging 'back to basics' organising commitments.

The Organisational Report acknowledges the steady increase in membership of unions, including where the impact of the neo-liberal restructuring of the economy followed by the resultant impact of the global financial crisis was deeply felt. The report accepts that the increase in most cases is not due to active recruitment and organising of new members and/or servicing existing members.

A variety of recruitment methods have been adopted some which are akin to corporate advertising approaches such as billboards on busy roads and branded union cars bearing 'a union of choice' tagged to their names. The impact of these 'innovative' ways to display unions is yet to be established. The report seems to take the view that, because of the positive image of Cosatu and what it represents historically and currently, workers sometime tend to associate with the federation and less with individual affiliates. This is notwithstanding the gains made in collective bargaining by individual affiliates, which may also be that the first contact of workers with union organisation is not only the popular presence of the federation but unions themselves.

Vally continues to decry the fact that social corporatism elevates the role and importance of technocratic planners at the expense of internal union democratic practice. As said earlier, part of the reasons for the waning of the participatory version of democracy is the centralisation of bureaucracy as a feature and an evil necessity of social corporatism.

However, it is also important to point out that while Cosatu has retained its campaigning character in how it conducts politics, it has given less attention to trade union education and organising. These fountains of union activism are now handled by policy and research technocrats. It is not unusual, for many years now, for the Nedcom to meet without workers and senior leadership of unions and the federation due to Nedlac and other such meetings that will be taking place at the same time.

It is also not unusual for education structures failing to meet without any sense of anxiety from the union leadership or the membership due to endless bargaining council meetings. Arguably centralised bargaining is a key feature of social corporatism that has had a share in draining off innovative activism at the base – further lending support to centralised technocracy and thus a shift to representative democracy. As a result, trade union education and organising has been a cursed cousin in the extended Cosatu family.

However, the *Secretariat Report* does not show how policies that are being researched and ultimately churned out have empowered organising and education activities. However, it should be accepted that there seems to be a link between campaigning and policy development due to the demands made on socio-economic policy issues.

While often the policies crafted and presented are not generally mandated through structures below national meetings, due to the weaknesses identified in the report, education could play a useful role. For example, it can ensure that members and shop stewards are involved in debates that take place and also provide useful feedback that fits into a multi-layered cycle of policy and research development.

This shift from education and organising on the one hand to research and policy development on the other is not an accident of history but is informed by a context. Union activism has changed meaning. There is a definite shift from union activism, as part of an effort to continue fighting for a different society, to a 'career in trade unions' often a temporary stopover to something big.

This shift is felt not only in how union officials relate to their work but how the leadership sees and treats them, 'just as employees'. While the report is strong on the need to weed out corruption and all the negative developments affecting society, it does not tackle the issue that activism is a fading feature of trade union life. Additionally, trade unions are beginning to be like any other employment situation: neither inspired by energy for social change nor passion for serving humanity. Importantly, this is not unique to the so-called 'new worker' – the one without a sense of history of activism. Even the older generation has lost steam.

WORKPLACE ORGANISING AND SHOP STEWARDS

The strength of the report lies in its ability to take the bull by its horns. It accepts that a social distance exists between the leadership of the broad trade union movement and its membership base. Increasingly, the life of union leadership does not reflect the values on which the broad labour movement was founded and represents. It is also divorced from the lived experiences of ordinary workers.

In this regard, Themba Masondo in the latest book *Cosatu's contested legacy* provides a useful sociological analysis of the social mobility of shop stewards from the shop floor to positions in the government and the private



Emphasising a point at the Congress: Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi.

sector mainly to union investment companies. Many speakers during the congress kept on harping on the need for 'procedural correctness' especially when the federation leadership seemed to flout standing orders of the congress.

One of the speakers alluded to the fact that unfortunately most of the shop stewards who were attending the national congress for the first time were learning how to break procedures from the senior leadership. This could have serious implications on how they perceive and provide leadership in their unions and the federation. Clearly the report recognised that the senior leadership of affiliates and the union federation are role models, in their own right, and their behaviour has serious implications for the changing values of the union movement.

Research and scholarship into

the changing roles and character of shop stewards does not appreciate how the social behaviour of senior leadership of affiliated unions and the union federation shapes the workplace behaviour and leader.

Nunurayi Mutyanda (*SALB 36.2*) makes several observations about the changing meaning of being a shop steward in Cosatu. This is largely tied to benefits either from employers in relation to organisational rights conferred on unions upon recognition or their unions giving out allowances to their shop stewards. Mutyanda paints a mixed picture of some union shop stewards getting pecks whilst others were not getting them. The point has been made already that these developments in the country's industrial relations system are not new to the capitalist system and have been discussed and debated over time, especially in the context of the golden age

of the post Second World War industrial relations systems.

What is worrying is that what seemed to have been referred to as a movement *within* a movement with regards to the shop steward movement by Steven Friedman in his *Building tomorrow today* is weak within the union federation. The movement is continuously vulnerable to the seduction of the system due to perks given to shop stewards as well as the possibility of a social distance emerging in the workplace between them and other workers whom they are supposed to lead at the workplace. ¹⁸

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