

WFTU comes to town

In February the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU)'s presidential council met in Johannesburg, South Africa. **Elijah Chiwota** writes about the importance of the meeting and its significance to trade unions who feel that a more militant approach is required to effectively confront capitalism

Militant unionists believe that there is political space for a left socialist workers' international. This space can be found in the WFTU. For this reason some Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) affiliates are members of the WFTU. These are the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), Police, Prisons and Civil Rights Union (Popcru) and Chemical Energy Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union (Ceppwawu).

'Our four unions are informed by our ideological posture and a shared vision of a socialist South Africa and world order that see an end to the crisis of capitalism and the global misery it unleashes on the poor. We are convinced that the solution is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Our immediate priority is to unite the international working class regardless of colour, religion or sex,' read a statement from the quartet.

Later in the year the unions will persuade other affiliates during

the Cosatu Congress to join the WFTU as part of 'forging unity and close links with other like-minded, class orientated and revolutionary trade unions.' Such African and world trade unions 'need to rally and join WFTU, as the only reliable and trusted global federation of workers to reverse the barbarity and decay of the capitalist system.'

The opening ceremony was addressed by Cosatu president Sdumo Dlamini and WFTU general secretary George Mavrikos. Dlamini said Cosatu shared similar 'ideological perspectives' with WFTU and that 'socialism is the answer'. He saw unity between the WFTU and International Trade Union Congress (ITUC) as important for international trade unionism.

Mavrikos outlined some of the harsh effects of the capitalist crisis. 'Within the very difficult conditions of a capitalist economic crisis, we have to combat the imperialist barbarism, the anti-communism which is strengthened, the widespread elimination of working rights, the increased unemployment, particularly among young people and women, the persecution and murders of trade unionists, the racism and the xenophobia.'

William Matlala



Reviving the WFTU: George Mavrikos.



High-powered delegates: Presidents of Popcru, Ceppwawu, Cosatu and Nehawu at WFTU conference.

As jobs disappeared the crisis also promoted casual work. 'The most acute labour problems that are raised by the capitalist crisis are unemployment, poverty, privatisation, intra-capitalistic rivalries and imperialist aggression. In these conditions of deep economic crisis the capitalists are trying to divide a working place to two or three part-time workers.'

The number of unemployed people was also increasing. 'According to the latest International Labour Organization data, the unemployed and poor workers are more than one-billion. 900-million workers have to live with an "income" below two Euros per day. In Spain, the unemployed are 5.3-million, in France three-million, and in Greece one-million. In the European Union, unemployment now exceeds 23-million; mainly young men and women,' added Mavrikos.

The presidential council, taking place in Africa for the first time since the formation of the WFTU, was held under the theme 'Capitalist barbarism, crisis and imperialist wars or socialism'. Trade union leaders from the Global North and South attended.

LIBERATION STRUGGLE

The WFTU and South Africa's liberation struggle share a common

history. 'The WFTU enjoys a special relationship and honour amongst the trade union movement in South Africa developed over many years during the struggle for national liberation, freedom and struggle for a socialist South Africa. It was the WFTU owing to its close relations with the then South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) that the liberation movement led by the African National Congress (ANC) was able to establish contacts or receive material support from the left-leaning countries such as the Soviet Union, Vietnam, China, Cuba and other countries,' added the statement.

Historically, the WFTU played a critical role in the struggle against capitalism, colonialism and imperialism. During the early days of the WFTU heroes of South Africa's liberation struggle, such as Moses Kotane, Moses Mabhida, Michael Harmel, John Nkadimeng and Eric 'Stalin' Mtshali, took part in its activities. Mark Shope worked as a resident representative at the WFTU headquarters in Prague, Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia).

The meeting coincided with the ANC's centenary celebrations. 'This coincidence is not a sheer accident of history, but informed

by the organic role played by the trade union movement in South Africa and the world in radicalising the ANC, which became rooted amongst the masses!'

GLOBAL CAPITALIST CRISIS

The meeting was also taking place at the time of the global economic crisis and popular protests against the neo-liberal economic system. 'The capitalist system is inherently a crisis-ridden system. It is blatantly obvious for millions of workers around the world that the crisis is not caused by faults in the system, but that the system itself is defective,' said Mavrikos.

This called for a need to strengthen the struggle against multinational companies and global capitalist restructuring which eroded social and labour rights. 'Around the world we are witnessing the obliteration of productive forces, plundering of resources, mass dismissals, factory closures, and the comprehensive attack on workers and trade union rights. The erosion of civil liberties and the attack on countries' sovereignty is increasing at an alarming speed globally,' continued the WFTU general secretary.

The United States was a heavily indebted country and European countries were the same. These countries were on the brink of

collapse because of the misuse of tax payers' money to bail out the rich.

'The resurgence of popular and radical activism or mass rooted movements, such as Occupy Wall Street movements, strike actions in Athens, London and around the world by working-class conscious youth are a direct affirmation of the crisis of capitalism,' added Mavrikos.

Unfortunately, the popular protests have been met with violence. 'All these uprisings by a different range of class forces compelled the imperialist ruling class to explore aggressive ways of maintaining control like waging imperialist wars to secure resources, and demanding definite trade relations. The imperialist sponsored war in Libya and the dastardly execution of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, and the threats by Israel and the US to attack Iran are clear indications of the preparedness of imperialist powers to use military power to rescue capitalism,' concluded the general secretary.

WORKING CLASS AND TRADE UNION UNITY

The attack on the working class needed more organisation and solidarity. 'The current global barbarity and decay as permeated by the global crises of capitalism presents a mammoth task or opportunity for the working-class and the poor of Africa and the world to deepen working-class internationalism and solidarity. Never before has working-class internationalism, universalism, been more important than now. This is in fact made possible by the very expansion of capitalism all over the globe!' added the quartet.

The WFTU has been on the scene for some time. Formed in 1945 in Paris, France after the Second World War, its first congress took place against the background of a united military front victory against

Hitler-led fascist forces. The united military front was between the West led by the United States and the East led by the Soviet Union. There were also broad-based alliances in many countries, even at an international level, between progressive organisations that were against fascism.

'Hence, this world-wide spirit of united action for justice found expression in the trade union movement when the WFTU was formed, bringing together unions from the West and East led by the Congress of Industrial Organisations of the United States and All Union Central Council of Trade Unions of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Other major union centres were the Chinese Federation of Labour and Trade Union Congress of Britain. The delegates represented 55 countries and 20 international organisations, at a time when some countries were still under colonial oppression.'

At present the WFTU has 82-million members in 120 countries and has headquarters in Athens, Greece since January 2006, where it is hosted by the All Militant Workers' Front. There are regional offices in each continent and recently a new office for Africa was opened in South Africa.

In 2011, under the banner of a 'Class-oriented, Uniting, Democratic, Modern and Independent' trade union movement, the WFTU held its 16th World Trade Union Congress in Athens, which was attended by 828 delegates from 101 countries. South Africa was represented by 13 delegates from Nehawu, Numsa and Ceppwawu and Cosatu sent a representative.

The other roles are that it challenges the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO) in international forums. Workers' rights are promoted together with recognition of

women and young workers by international conventions and national legislation. Public education, health, social and economic rights for all the people of the world and fighting against the plundering of natural resources by transnational monopolies in the Global South are some of the issues on its agenda.

WFTU documents list the following principles:

- Internal democracy – elections for all bodies at all levels.
- Internationalist working-class solidarity.
- To struggle for peace and friendship between people and against imperialist wars.
- To defend the right of every people and every working class to decide for themselves about their present and future.
- To fight against privatisation and neo-liberalism in general.
- To promote the unity of the working class – with the poor peasants, the landless and progressive intellectuals as its closest allies.
- To involve young people, women and migrant workers in life, activities and administration of trade unions.
- To give priority to the health and safety issues for workers and the improvement of the quality of life and the environment in general.

ITUC NOT RADICAL

The WFTU is seen as being close to the ground than ITUC. Militant unionists argue that by design, ITUC is a representative body of national federations from developed and developing countries' but does not really address issues that concern individual unions. Therefore, it is an all-embracing organisation that needs to find a middle road for the federations.

Those who are blunter describe it as 'capitalist-oriented' as it is seen as sympathetic to the IMF, the

World Bank and the WTO or even to Zionist capital. One of ITUC's affiliates Histadrut is known for identifying with apartheid policies of the Israeli government towards Palestinian workers.

This criticism of ITUC is not new. According to Eddie Webster and Rob Lambert (*SALB* 17. 3) there were huge debates about whether Cosatu should affiliate to the predecessor of ITUC, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). Amongst its sins, the ICFTU had not only supported white racist unions during the apartheid era, but dictatorships in Asia as well.

It seems though that little has changed. As a result of this Peter Waterman says the ITUC has been so ineffective against the neo-liberal class war to an extent that one of its former leaders called it a 'jester'. However, Cosatu joined ITUC in 1995 because of the uncertainty caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc. Although it criticises ITUC from time to time, it still remains a member but has

always been sympathetic to the WFTU.

Referring to criticism of ITUC by Cosatu, Waterman says: 'Such affiliations have, however, had no visible impact on ITUC's social-liberalism and Eurocentrism. Indeed, ITUC does not even bother to publicly respond to Cosatu's public criticism. And Cosatu's Leftist and Southern union friends remain silently within it, suggesting continued dependence on what remains, admittedly, by far the largest international union body.'

It still remains to be seen how the two international unions can work together as suggested by Dlamini. The other issue will also be to see how they continue to be relevant in an environment where the working class is shrinking due to job losses under the neo-liberal economic system.

CONCLUSION

Waterman argues that the interest of South African trade unions in WFTU is ideological and based on anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric as well as a social reformist

strategy. The reformist strategy is known by such slogans as 'social security for all, collective bargaining - collective agreements, trade union and democratic freedoms, working week of seven hours a day, five days a week, 35 hours per week, better salaries, solidarity with the Palestinian people, freedom to the five Cubans, etc.'

He describes the WFTU's current efforts as a 'second coming', after making what he considers self-inflicted wounds like supporting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The global union also failed to take advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union by reinventing itself as a trade union international of the Global South. Its support of undemocratic regimes also tarnished its name. Peter Hall-Jones says that for now what is important is for the WFTU to form partnerships with unions, build representation, workers' voice and democracy at the workplace. How it will move its agenda into the future without shooting itself in the foot, as happened in the past, is critical. ^{LB}



Numsa delegates sing at WFTU conference.

William Matlala