

drivers participated.

The tripartite alliance has promised rolling mass action – an ongoing series of demonstrations and protests – until democratic elections are held and the violence is curbed. COSATU has promised to defend workers

dismissed during the strike and to blacklist employer hardliners.

It will be important to see if the alliance, and COSATU in particular, can build on the momentum of a momentous week. ❖

A winter of discontent

What were the reasons behind the August mass action campaign? And what does the success of the action mean for the ANC, its allies, and its opponents? JEREMY BASKIN looks at these questions as well as the future of the aborted SACCOLA/COSATU charter.

Four million workers absent for two days; millions more students absent from school; major demonstrations and marches - by any criteria, the ANC and its allies achieved what they set out to do. Indeed, from all accounts, the mass action programme during the first week of August involved more people and covered a greater geographical range than any other comparable action in our country's history (see previous article).

Relatively few workers were dismissed as a result of the action. COSATU estimates that approximately 1 000 members lost their jobs. It remains to be seen how the tripartite alliance (not simply the unions) fights for their re-instatement.

Indirect casualties were more disturbing. Approximately 30 people lost their lives on the two days of the general strike. This, sadly, does

not represent an increase in the number of deaths which could have been expected on any other two 'normal' days. Some have blamed these deaths on the mass action itself, implying that the victims were people opposed to the strike. However, the dead included many ANC supporters, such as those massacred in Northern Natal, allegedly by KwaZulu policemen.

The intimidation factor

Some have argued that the success of the action was due to widespread intimidation and the non-availability of transport. In the nature of things, this allegation is hard to deny. Many people may well have felt scared to go to work, even without being directly threatened and despite the calls for peaceful action. Others may have reported intimidation to their

employers in the hope of alleviating disciplinary action. Still others may have felt the intimidation of social pressure, or past experience.

But if the intimidation factor is to be seriously analysed then one must explore it in all its complexity. Is it intimidation if workers are threatened with dismissal should they not come to work? How does one explain the almost complete lack of action on the farms, if not by reference to employer intimidation (or does the ANC have no farmworker support)? And how does one account for no reports of intimidation in most of the country's townships? Can a small minority really compel four million organised workers to stay at home?

Whatever 'ifs' and 'buts' one adds to the equation, the fact remains that this was a major display of strength by the ANC and its allies.

A dual purpose

What propelled the alliance towards mass action? Government behaviour during CODESA II, when they rejected the extremely moderate compromises put forward by the ANC, was the final straw. But the dispute over percentages was only the symptom of a deeper problem. Serious doubts about the extent of government's commitment to democracy were matched by concern over the pace of change. The evidence was mounting that government wanted a protracted negotiating phase, endlessly talking while retaining control of the instruments of power.

The ANC was caught between a rock and a hard place. It could make a quick deal based on major concessions, the 'realist' option, or stand firm on key issues (like majority rule) and be blamed for the delays. The violence made the problem worse. Security force destabilisation, along the lines of its Renamo operations in Mozambique, added to the chaos. Price increases, job losses, and drought, made life worse for ordinary people. Unable to stop the violence or to show that its talking policy was leading to a new dispensation, the ANC was losing credibility among its own supporters.

Any political organisation ignores this layer of support at its peril. The ANC rank and file,

previously the agents of mobilisation, was slowly losing hope or succumbing to apathy. They were becoming spectators in the process of transition. This in turn fuelled the loss of credibility, with ANC leaders increasingly seen as distant from ordinary members. Negotiations with the regime were predominating, or at least were seen to predominate, over mass participation.

The mass action was, therefore, as much about revitalising the ANC as about challenging the government and regaining the political initiative. The latter aim was explicit, the former, indirect. The success of the August actions must, in part, be judged by the extent to which it has boosted the standing of the ANC among its own membership.

Implications for others

The government anticipated a poorly-supported campaign. This view was shared by much of the press, perhaps not surprisingly given the relatively weak warm-up actions during July. In the event the state was forced to rely on "intimidation" to explain the enormity of the stayaway.

Politically, de Klerk is in a dilemma. He has no problems with the delay in negotiations - as long as he can retain control of the process and not be seen to be losing control of the country. The mass action campaign questions whether he can have it both ways.

The low-intensity war being waged against the democratic movement is beginning to affect the stability of the country as a whole, as happened in Mozambique. Many supporters of the regime, particularly in business, are beginning to question whether this price is worth paying to enable the present incumbents to remain in power. Certainly de Klerk is now under heavy pressure to make concessions on the central issues of democracy and peace.

The ANC too, faces pressure to make concessions. This is unlikely to be effective, at least in the short run. Despite official denials, it is privately conceded that the mass action has changed the balance of forces within both the ANC and the alliance. COSATU pressed hardest for mass action and has shown it can

LABOUR ACTION

work. This has enhanced their position. SACP activists were heavily involved - for example, organising the massive march on Ciskei. The sort of compromises offered by the ANC at CODESA II are unlikely to get back onto the table in the immediate future.

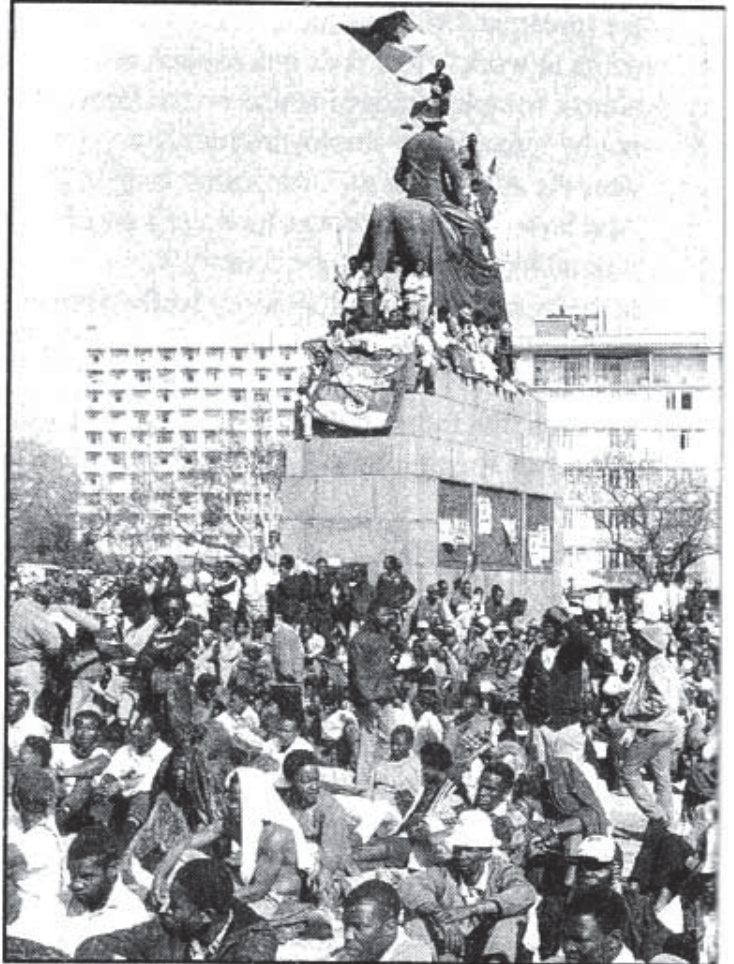
The stars are waning for "the handshakers", as some comrades graphically label them. The argument is simple: Only if the alliance is strong can it negotiate with confidence. It is not an argument against negotiation as such. Rather, it links negotiations with power, an argument, incidentally, long a basic fact of life for unionists.

By any interpretation, the mass action campaign left the PAC and NACTU with egg on their faces. During mobilisation both remained relatively non-committal. But as the week of action approached they began to distance themselves, and even condemn it. Public statements were made calling on people to go to work, and decrying the "so-called mass action". It was argued that the action was not revolutionary enough, being aimed not at the overthrow of the regime but at getting negotiations, and CODESA, back on track and pressurising the regime into power-sharing.*

The key point here is not the merits of these arguments but the fact that PAC and NACTU opposition to the action made no noticeable difference to its success. And this, furthermore, at a time when the PAC's consistent opposition to CODESA and its persistent calls for a harder line, could have been expected to boost its popular standing. NACTU's assistant general secretary, Mahlomola Skhosana, has argued that NACTU members who stayed at home did so for many reasons including intimidation, lack of transport, and the desire for a long weekend.

But these arguments are not entirely convincing. At the NACTU-organised AECI plant in Modderfontein, for example, only a small percentage of workers stayed away when other plants in the vicinity reported 100% absenteeism. Management attributed this to the SACWU presence. By contrast, most other

NACTU-organised factories which *Labour Bulletin* surveyed - from Sasolburg to Industria to the East Rand - reported absenteeism rates close to 100%. At Lever Brothers, the factory where NACTU president James Mndaweni is employed, workers we spoke to said that



The ANC flag flies high from the statue of Gen. Louis Botha in the Union Building grounds

Photo: William Matla

shopstewards had asked them to ignore the stayaway call. Despite this, workers met and decided to support the action.

None of this is cause for gloating by COSATU. NACTU has shown an ability to retain an organised base. What it does suggest, however, is that NACTU's political influence may be limited and that many of its ordinary members (the majority?) support or sympathise with the ANC. Both the PAC and NACTU will struggle to shake off their image as a numerically

* When it later emerged that the PAC was itself involved in talks with the government, their arguments looked even thinner

marginal political force, which places opposition to the ANC too high on its agenda.

Inkatha was also marginalised further by the action. Support for the stayaway was high in Natal, its so-called stronghold, and belied Buthelezi's claim to represent the Zulu nation. This was despite strong IFP hostility to the mass action campaign, including threats to stop it and offers to protect anyone going to work. The alliances marches and demonstrations were less strongly supported than in other parts of the country. This may have reflected poor organisation or fear of Inkatha attack. The most publicised incidents were attempts by armed Inkatha-supporting impis to stop both a march in Durban and a demonstration by bus drivers in Pietermaritzburg.

The SACCOLA/COSATU charter

Although the draft charter between COSATU and the employers' body, SACCOLA, was not signed, it remains an important document. It is made up of two elements. A policy section tackles the key issues of violence, poverty and democratic transition. A high level of convergence in business and union thinking on these problems is emerging.

The other part of the document tries to reach consensus on action, to find an agreed activity somewhere between extensive mass action and business quietude. This issue caused the agreement to fail. COSATU's negotiating team was prepared to reduce the two day strike to one day - if business joined the shutdown and brought the public sector on board. The latter was, perhaps, an unrealistic expectation, given the implicit anti-government nature of the protest.

Differences over what action was appropriate finally scuttled the agreement. SACCOLA's negotiating team could not get a mandate from its constituency for a one-day shutdown. Also, its initial confidence about including the public sector in the deal, proved unfounded. SACCOLA leadership were not the only ones facing problems. There were also rumblings within COSATU, from a number of affiliates and many of the regions. Even had business agreed to a shutdown it is possible that COSATU's negotiating team might have been

forced to renege. But this was never tested.

Despite its non-adoption the draft charter suggests there is a growing gap between big business and government. This could have important implications for the transition period. It is a gap which the government is anxious to bridge, which unionists are eager to widen, and which employers still want to explore. Both unionists and businessmen therefore agree that the charter is not dead and will, in all likelihood, form a basis for future discussions.

Future prospects

We are still far from making the transition to a democratic order. The week of mass action suggests that the lines are hardening, at least on the side of the alliance. The gap between the government and the ANC remains vast. This may, paradoxically, speed up the transition process. Sustained pressure should make it more difficult for de Klerk to footdrag on the issue of majority rule, and persuade the world that the new South Africa is already born. Aimless talking between the ANC and the government is out. This, and the current war of words, makes substantive negotiations more, not less, likely. In short, negotiations are not dead, although CODESA may be.

There are those who want to ditch negotiations and rely, for the time being, almost entirely on mass action. But they forget that the success of the August mass action remains relative. The alliance is still a long way from organising demonstrations of millions of people - the prerequisite for toppling the East German regime or the Shah of Iran. And, in our circumstances, while mass action may get the adrenalin going it does not, by itself, bring power closer. The challenge, for the alliance, will be to resume negotiations without ditching mass action: to find the correct balance between talking and mass involvement in bringing about a democratic order.

"Rolling mass action" is seen by its proponents not as an event, but as a process; a chain of activity moving from one step to the next. If the practice matches the theory then the August week of action is unlikely to be the last. ☆ (24 August 1992)