

Assessing Satucc

Southern African unionists speak

The Southern African Trade Union Co-ordinating Council (Satucc) was formed in the early 1980s. We spoke to a number of unionists attending a Fredrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) sponsored workshop, and gained their views on Satucc.

All the unionists stressed the need for Satucc to play a co-ordinating role and advance workers' interests in the region. For example, Tom Dlamini co-ordinator for workers' education for the Swaziland Federation of Trade Unions (SFTU) thought that Satucc should 'create a sub-regional block for all unions within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). It should harmonise relations between unions and labour relations amongst SADC member states. It also has the capacity to articulate workers' issues such as trade union rights and human resource issues, at SADC level.'

Sylvester Tembo, secretary-general of the Zambia Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), reiterated this view: 'Satucc should be co-ordinating activities of trade unions in the region and, where possible, influence decisions in the SADC region.'

Satucc's work is made more difficult and complex given the circumstances many of its affiliates work under including:

- a lack of stable democracies in some countries;
- a lack of worker and trade union rights in some countries;

by Tanya van Meelis and Etienne Vlok

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- constraints imposed by World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) programmes;
 - export processing zones (EPZs);
 - employers hostile to trade unions.

Satucc's strength

Interestingly, when asked what Satucc's strengths were, the unionists pointed to external strengths such as political systems, the potential role that South African unions can play and donor funding to assist Satucc. They were also optimistic about the role that Satucc may play, but did not point to strengths in what Satucc is doing now, other than existing and meeting. Utlwanang Dimpe - vice-president of the Central Bank Union, Botswana noted that: 'The majority of Satucc member states have the national unions operating in their countries. Satucc is operating in a relatively democratic setup, although there is still war in Angola. But not the same as ten years ago. The advent of the South African democracy is also a strength because we can learn from their experience. They will bring financial and human resources. This is advantageous. Another strength is its existing contacts with other friendly

structures and organisations such as the FES.'

'It has regional organisation. It is of benefit to our region that is why Satucc should play a big role in the region. There are issues that need to be solved at the region according to the complexities of the region. There is a willingness from the Satucc officers and trade union representatives to solve this problem, for instance, the symposium that is sponsored by the FES. We are sure that it is very fruitful to workers,' says João Antonio Tambi head of the international department of União Nacional dos Trabalhadores Angolanos-Confederação Sindical (National Union of Angolan Workers - UNTA-CS).

Raymond Motherph, first assistant general secretary of the Lesotho Trade Union Congress, says Satucc has brought the unions in the region together.

Satucc's weaknesses

Lack of a clear goal, lack of resources and a lack of functioning structures hamper Satucc's work. Dimpe explained: 'The lack of a well-coordinated structure of Satucc to serve its affiliates is a weakness. If we had the same secretariat and resources as SADC we could do the same work.'

Tembo stressed the lack of resources as a major weakness: 'The affiliates do not seem to subscribe effectively towards the financial base. There seems to be administrative problems and the absence of the chief executive produces negative results. There is also a decline in the political will of Satucc. The affiliates are not as committed as at the start. I ascribe this to the centres facing threats to their existence and a loss of members. Affiliates are also part of many other organisations and Satucc is not number one. This could be changed. We have the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU) to which we affiliate and the International

Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) also. Some activities of OATUU can be done by Satucc. OATUU's work can be broken into regions which Satucc must then do. When Satucc was being formed the politicians in SADC supported it and promised funds but it did not happen. Like Europe where the state assists trade unions financially, our governments could do it through the SADC to Satucc'

Spirah Bhiuasera from the Botswana Federation of Trade Unions pointed to a lack of communication in Satucc: 'Communication is a weakness in Satucc, but I must qualify that by saying that I'm not very familiar with what is happening.'

Interestingly, none of the unionists pointed to the damaging effect that existing political tensions between and within countries have on the affiliates and the potential that this has to heighten division between workers in the sub-region. For example, the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) posed stark challenges regarding countries' interventions on the issue and support from the national unions.

Another important issue is the uneven impact that trade liberalisation will have on countries at various stages of economic development, and the implications that this has for worker solidarity.

Building solidarity

All delegates thought it is very important to share information and resource, and build worker solidarity in the region.

Bhiuasera argues that 'Satucc needs first to network and share information so that we can understand the problems'.

For Dimpe, sharing is also crucial: 'We should share resources. Those affiliates that are established should share with the less-developed affiliates, such as COSATU with the Angolan and Mozambican unions.'

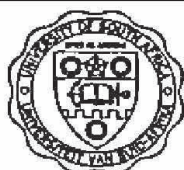
We must organise ourselves and have minimum standards, so there will not be a case like in Botswana where Zimbabwean workers come and undermine our workers.'

Dlamini pointed to the need to harmonise industrial relations systems and wages to build solidarity: 'It is incumbent on the national unions to take up the challenge of establishing minimum labour standards which will include a minimum wage. I think it is possible because all unions have to do is collect existing agreements and harmonise the standards contained in the agreements with employers sectorally and nationally. We need to set up sectoral bargaining in the region. However, employers are using contracts - replacing permanent workers with casuals. This undermines collective bargaining and centralised bargaining.'

Dilemmas

The interviews and above quotations point to great enthusiasm to build solidarity and an effective Satucc. However, this enthusiasm faces enormous internal and external obstacles. Internal obstacles include a lack of resources and poorly functioning structures. External obstacles include an environment hostile to unions, mobile capital and challenges posed by trade liberalisation. The organisational and political challenges in building regionalism pose a number of dilemmas. For example, national campaigns, such as COSATU's 'made in South Africa campaign' may be seen to be advancing South African workers' interests at the expense of other workers in the region. Another dilemma is that regional initiatives, such as those taking place in clothing and textile, require already scarce resources that are also needed at national level. ★

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