

Bureaucracy is killing TUCSA

By the time the emerging black unions came on the scene the existing registered unions faced rising pressure to be seen not be to acting like sweetheart unions.

Ismail Mohammed explored the state of the Trade Union Council of SA (TUCSA) and the problems it experienced as it became too bureaucratised.

For those in the labour movement who doubt that the most important problem facing workers can be the bankruptcy of their own leadership, the experience of the Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) is worth examining. In TUCSA, more perhaps than in any other union body in the country, the voice of workers has been reduced to a whisper in the grip of bureaucracy.

Here I will examine the leadership crisis in TUCSA and suggest remedies to the problems. The history of TUCSA is well documented and will not be repeated here. However, it is

important to note that the current leadership of TUCSA, which includes ex-Sactu (South African Congress of Trade Unions) stalwarts like Lucy Mvubelo and Norman Daniels, for the most part have been around for a long time. It is this almost entirely white 'old guard', which completely dominates the leading bodies in TUCSA and, together with its allies, many of whom occupy the leading positions in the most powerful TUCSA unions, comprises the heart of TUCSA's bureaucratic machine.

The performance of bureaucracy at TUCSA's 29th annual conference in Port Elizabeth in 1983 was, despite the fact that SA is in the midst of one of the most turbulent periods in her history, not substantially different to previous years. Except in one crucial aspect. As they bowed more deeply in the direction of big business and 'verligte' government, they attacked the emerging union movement and in particular the unregistered unions. The climax of this attack was their overwhelming support for a resolution calling on the government to ban all unregistered trade unions.

TUCSA'S POLICY IN TODAY'S CONDITIONS

To understand TUCSA's position, we need to grasp the conditions in which TUCSA leadership is seeking to operate. South Africa is currently in the grip of a deep social, political and economic crisis. The primary feature of the crisis is the inability of the profit system to satisfy even the most basic needs of the working class. Workers, of all colours, are under attack as unemployment grows, inflation spirals and basic necessities like housing become more out of reach.

This, coupled with state initiatives which promise to step up even further controls over black workers (virtually entirely through repression) while simultaneously eroding the democratic rights and privileges of white workers, has led to the rapid growth of

support and organisation in the working class of two radical, and diametrically opposed, political 'solutions' to the crisis. To the left of TUCSA mainly black workers have, over the last decade, built up their unions around the struggle for, generally speaking, workers' control over the decisions affecting their day-to-day lives.

To the right of TUCSA white workers are being increasingly drawn to unions like the Mine Workers' Union (MWU) and political organisations like the Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP), Afrikaanse Weerstand Beveeging (AWB) and Conservative Party (CP) which again, generally speaking, strive for the protection of white privilege and white democracy in a white state. In the middle of this increasing politically charged labour movement, stand the tired old TUCSA bureaucrats reminding us that they represent 440 000 workers of all 'types' so 'politics' must be kept out of TUCSA. And the general secretary, Grobbelaar, who has put his name behind a 'yes' vote in the referendum (along with a group of leading businessmen and TUCSA's Robby Botha, Wally Grobler, Anna Scheepers and LC Scheepers) and his ilk, would like to pretend that this position in itself is not political!

Of course, the 'no politics' ploy is a weapon of the bureaucracy to try and ensure that it is their politics, which continue to dominate TUCSA policy. The resolutions taken at the conference show not only that their politics still completely dominate TUCSA policy, but also that they are moving rapidly to the right, and in some cases even to the right of government policy itself.

Although it cannot be dealt with in the confines of this article, it is important to note that there is a material basis within TUCSA for the bureaucracy's reactionary politics. This basis lies chiefly amongst the white labour aristocracy though also amongst the upper layers of skilled workers of other colours.

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TUCSA leadership, it is interesting to note what happens to resolutions adopted at conferences. They are, in the words of Grobbelaar, 'processed by the NEC'. It is not unfair to say that TUCSA is completely summed up in that phrase. It means basically that if leadership is mandated by conference to do something about a particular issue it will consider it at an NEC meeting and decide what, if any, action to take about it. And these 'actions' are supposed to provide leadership to 440 000 workers looking for a way forward in the struggle!

WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR TUCSA WORKERS?

There is absolutely no hope whatsoever that TUCSA's leadership can pull itself out of the crisis that it created and perpetuated itself. Its whole outlook is conditioned by its years of lobbying in government and big business circles for 'change', so that today the only things that distinguish it from government and big business circles are when it comes out to the right of these forces. The 'goings on at the PE conference are just one small illustration of this. Besides the cocktail parties hosted by the mayor and an insurance company; besides the free Wilson Rowntree sweets and the paucity of worker delegates; besides the whole pomp and ceremony of the conference which aptly matched the five star hotel where it took place, the conference was treated to the Minister of Transport, Hendrick Schoeman and the president of the Free Market Foundation, Leon Louw, as guest speakers.

True, they appear mere trifles, but taken together with the number of state bodies TUCSA leadership is represented on; the number of big business conferences and seminars TUCSA leadership participate in; the 'free market' ideology which is continually pumped by leadership, one gets a better picture.

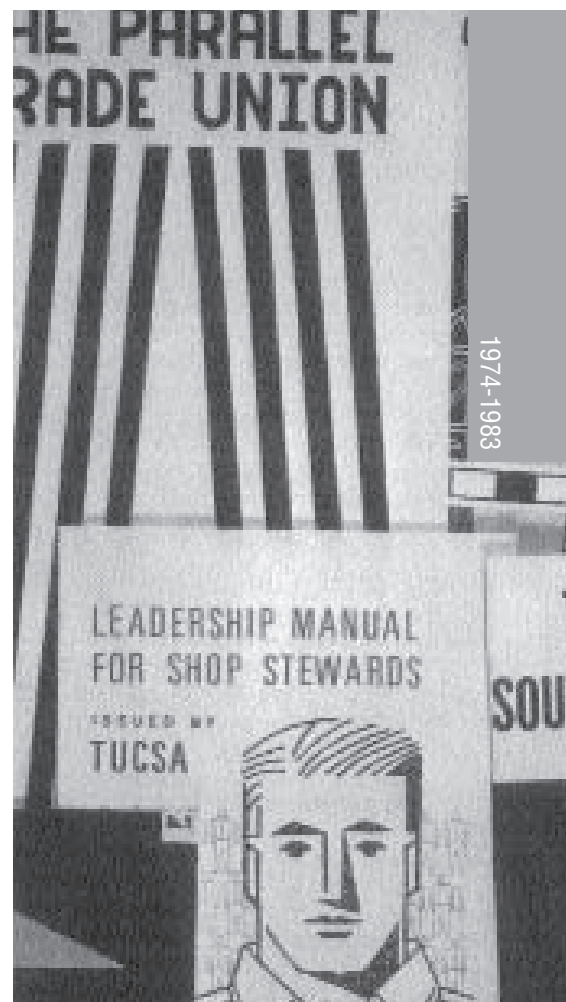
TUCSA leadership is fighting for its very life. In order to maintain themselves and protect themselves from the threat of the emerging unions in particular, they need to

tighten their grip over the 440 000 workers in TUCSA. To do this they are being forced to the right, as they cannot even begin to compete with the emerging unions on the terrain of a struggle for leadership of the mainly black working class. They have, at all costs, to maintain their hold on TUCSA while trying, by any means possible, to expand their numerical base.

In this situation, where they are now on the defensive and fighting to keep control, any criticism – especially from its own ranks – is intolerable. They are forced to attack wherever dissent emerges because they have no space left to accommodate it while still keeping control of the situation. That is why, in relation to the emerging union, they have now unambiguously opted for the strategy of attack as the best form of defence. And the case is similar within TUCSA itself.

The Boilermakers Society did not just pull out of TUCSA – they were driven out. Long before the Boilermakers' Ike van der Watt raised his polite and fairly muted criticisms of TUCSA's direction, they were being attacked in a most hostile and arrogant manner. TUCSA's private 'Role in the Future' document, which pretends to offer a solution to the 'stagnation and death of TUSCA' (Grobbelaar) by attacking some of the worst features of the emerging union movement seemed primarily designed to head-off the Boilermakers' call for a special conference on TUCSA's future, as well as to pull in more money from affiliates.

So what is the way forward in TUCSA? What should be clear by now is that for workers in TUCSA to take even a tiny step forward, it will have to be taken against the existing leadership. The Boilermakers tried to do this but found the going too difficult. Pulling out became the only viable option for them. It is likely that if there are other unions which are dissatisfied with TUCSA, whether from the left or the right, they will over the next couple of years choose the same path as the Boilermakers. But the vast bulk of the unions presently in TUCSA will probably remain there in the medium-term.



This will mean that hundreds and thousands of workers will still be paralysed by the hold of the bureaucracy, that the 'dying' TUCSA will still not be 'dead'.

This in itself is not likely to break the hold of the bureaucracy of TUCSA workers. Only the workers of TUCSA can do that by struggling for control of their own organisations. This is impossible without a fight to kick out the entire bureaucratic leadership of TUCSA, from the NEC down to the component unions. Anything less than this will mean the continued stagnation and eventual death of TUCSA from the gradual splitting away and erosion of its base to it being eventually completely eclipsed by events.

Workers and militants in TUCSA need to take up the struggle to build democratic rank-and-file organisation in their unions around every issue facing them to demand accountability of their leadership; to expose at every turn cases of betrayal and corruption of their leadership. Otherwise the bureaucracy will kill TUCSA.

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