

COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance

A survey was conducted among COSATU members in 1994 and again in 1998. It aimed to assess COSATU members' attitudes and aspirations towards South Africa's democratic elections. (Psoulis, *Labour Bulletin*, vol 23 no 2) Statistical tests confirmed that the sample represented workers in key industries in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape. Researchers interviewed 643 workers and shopstewards in 1994, and 646 in 1998. This paper interprets the survey's main findings on the Tripartite Alliance (COSATU's alliance with the ANC and SACP)

Unions and the alliance

Changing society

COSATU is in the Tripartite Alliance because its members are committed to advancing workers' interests and changing society in the interests of all. This is demonstrated by workers' views on what interests political parties represent.

62% of workers indicated that if the majority of people who vote for a party in an election are workers, then that party must represent the interests of all its supporters. 30% indicated that the party must represent all South Africans, even if workers' interests have to be sacrificed. Only 8% indicated that only the interests of workers must be represented. This is consistent with the 1994 survey where

Vishwas Satgar and Conrad Jardin argue that though there are tensions within the alliance, it has a future. However, it must be rethought to ensure worker control and a space for workers to assert an agenda for society:

62% indicated that the party must represent all supporters, 32% said that the party must represent all South Africans, even if workers' interests are sacrificed and only 5% of respondents indicated that only workers' interests must be served.

These responses show that COSATU members have a commitment to a wider project in society that includes other class forces.

Leadership and policy

Workers were asked what the most important factor would be behind their decision to vote for a particular party. 61% said the most important factor would be the party's leadership and policies. Interestingly, 25% indicated they would choose a party on the basis of its policies, while only 11% would look at leadership alone. This shows that politicians in South Africa cannot manipulate workers by empty rhetoric - politicians have to clearly

define their policies and what they represent for society

Support for the alliance

Loyalty to COSATU

The majority of workers interviewed have a strong union-centered approach to politics – their political relationship with both the ANC and the SACP is grounded in a firm loyalty to COSATU. 54% of workers did not think they could rely on political parties to represent their interests. 10% were neutral and 36% thought they could rely on political parties to represent their interests.

Researchers asked whether workers would always need trade unions to protect their interests. 93% of workers thought workers would always need trade unions to protect their interests. 4% did not have a view on the matter and 3% disagreed.

The fact that most workers believe that political parties will not best represent their interests but that unions will, shows that workers believe COSATU is the most appropriate institution to protect them and advance their interests. Workers' vote for the ANC does not show support for the ANC per se – it shows support for the ANC in alliance with COSATU and the SACP. The vote does therefore not give the ANC a blank cheque to do what it wants.

Consultation with workers

Workers have a strong tradition of worker control and democracy in their unions. They expect this tradition to be extended to political democracy. The survey shows that workers support the alliance because they want to be involved in direct decision making on issues that government looks at. 73% expected the political party they voted for to consult with them on all issues when it is in Parliament. 25% expected the party that they voted for to consult with them on major issues.

Consultation with supporters

Consultation with its supporters on all issues	73%
Consultation with its supporters only on important issues	25%
Consultation with supporters is unnecessary because the party was elected	2%

As in the 1994 survey, workers wanted the parliamentarians they voted in, to be accountable.

Reporting to its constituencies when making decisions in Parliament

Reporting	1994	1999
Report every time.	68%	66%
Report on major issues:	28%	33%
Do not have to report:	3%	1%

Workers distinguished between report backs on all decisions and report backs on major issues. 66% said the parliamentarians must report back on every decision they take in Parliament. 33% said the parliamentarians must report back on important decisions only.

COSATU workers do not just want to vote and they do not accept a narrow representative politics where only leaders of political parties make decisions. Workers want to extend worker control and impact on broader politics and the direction of society.

Public policy and the alliance

Government's challenge, for the last five years, has been to deliver in terms of the RDP. The majority of COSATU workers interviewed in the survey are aware of the RDP and understand what it is. In 1994, only 24% of workers knew what the RDP was. This percentage has increased, and in 1998, 76% of workers interviewed knew what the RDP was.

Workers voted for the ANC-led alliance

because they wanted to transform society – they wanted society as a whole to benefit and they wanted the poor in particular to benefit. Organised workers have committed to the RDP and believe that it should be the policy mandate of the new democratic government. COSATU has therefore engaged in public policy-making to defend and advance the RDP.

COSATU has contested public policy at a macro level through Nedlac and Parliament. However, it has not carried workers with it when doing so. Most workers (62%) did not know what Nedlac was.

There has been a lack of worker control and involvement around Nedlac processes. 30% of workers indicated that they had been at union meetings where there was a report back on Nedlac. 69% did not receive a report back on Nedlac. This is notwithstanding the fact that about 42% of COSATU workers believed that Nedlac could be an important body through which COSATU can influence policy that is important to workers.

COSATU is committed to worker control and working class driven public policy-making. However, COSATU workers have not been at the forefront of policy-making. There has been minimal participation in local or community-based development forums and in local government budgetary processes. One in every three COSATU members is involved in community-based development forums. Only 47% thought these forums ensure delivery and community control of development, while 19% disagreed, and a staggering 33% did not know.

COSATU has not been fully engaged at macro and micro level public policy-making beyond the sophisticated interventions made by its leadership. It has failed to link worker control and worker involvement to public policy-making. Public policy-making has been influenced

and informed by COSATU at a national level but does not filter down to workers. It does not translate into a strategic understanding of extending worker control through participatory democracy. This lack of opportunity within COSATU for a 'bottom up' approach to contest policy raises a number of critical questions. Is this indicative of a new leadership style and practice that devalues worker debate, contribution and control? Have Nedlac engagements and parliamentary lobbying degenerated into a new kind of elite corporatism and deal-making which is not driven by working class struggles and ultimately from below? Is a new technocratic interventionism on the rise at the top of COSATU? Or can this break in the link between public policy contestation and worker control be attributed to a lack of organisational capacity at the centre of COSATU concerning communicating back to workers?

Whatever the answer to these questions, the rupture between worker control and public policy-making has major implications for the alliance.

Worker struggle and GEAR

Neo-liberal free market policies are a direct attack on the organised working class of any society. They promote the interests of transnational and local monopoly capital. Over the past few years (during South Africa's democratic transition) the ANC adopted a neo-liberal macro-economic policy (GEAR). This has placed South Africa on a development path that will not address its socio-economic problems. The working class has been put on the defensive by the pace and extent to which workplace restructuring has unfolded. At the same time, employers have used high levels of structural unemployment and technological



Workers voted for the ANC-led alliance because they wanted to transform society.

intensive production to keep wages low. They have also used strategies, like casualisation and subcontracting, to force organised workers to confront a political crossroads: fight or be destroyed.

COSATU chose to fight and has contested the negative thrusts of GEAR. This fight is ongoing and has created serious tensions with the ANC leadership in government around labour market deregulation, privatisation, and the liberalisation of industrial and exchange controls.

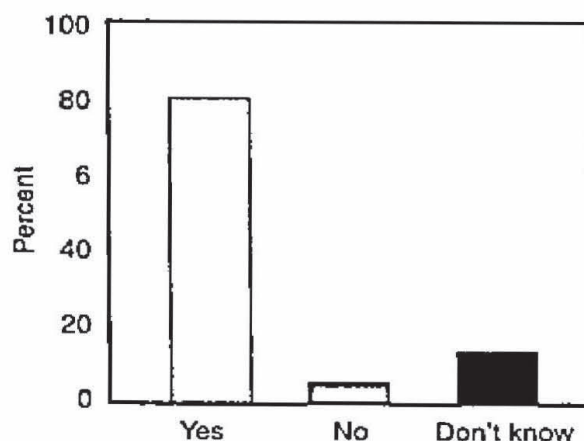
COSATU's independence has provided it with the capacity to fight in the context of the alliance. Despite the ANC government's economic policy, COSATU workers still believed they want to vote for the ANC because it has worker interests at heart.

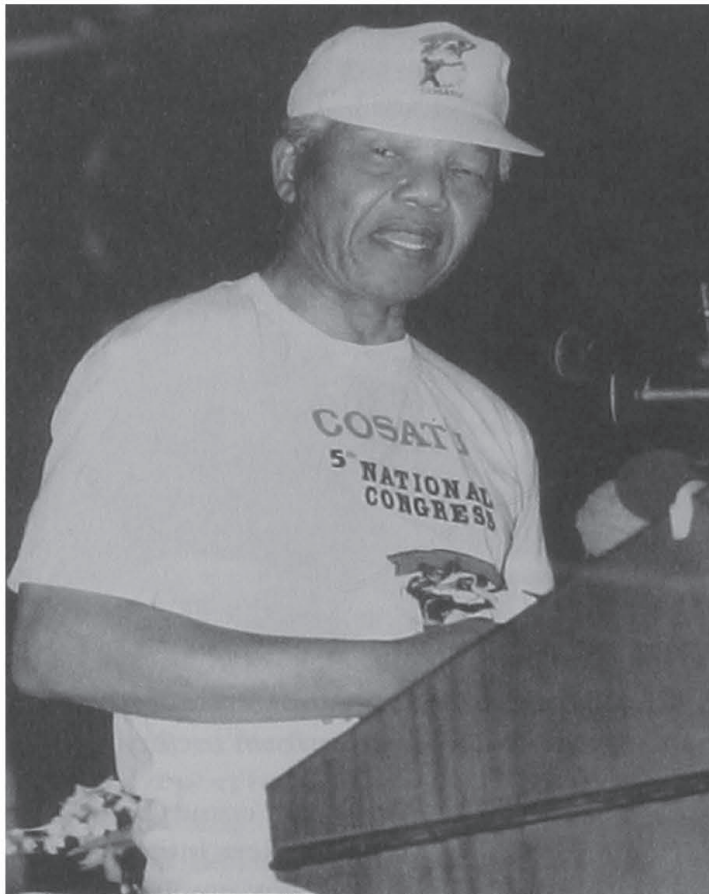
Close to 80% of workers interviewed thought that the party they vote for has workers' interests at heart. 6% disagreed and 14% did not know. Workers' strong support for the ANC, in the light of GEAR, prompts the existence of a political paradox or contradiction.

This political paradox comes into sharp focus when 77% of workers interviewed also pointed out that they would remove a party if it does not do what its supporters want.

The only likely explanation for this paradox lies in the fact that workers have not made the link between struggles they have been fighting from below and the rightward macro-economic shift of the ANC government. This is because most workers believe the RDP (or rather RDP

Do you think the party you intend voting for has workers' interests at heart?





61% of workers surveyed said they would choose a party because of its leaders and policies.

enabling macro-economic policy) still exists, while at the same time, the majority of workers do not know what GEAR is. For COSATU, this poses the challenge of worker-led class struggle. While the leadership may have been fighting the correct political fights, most COSATU members do not know the actual issues at stake. Tensions will rise in the alliance if the ANC government continues to implement neo-liberal economic policies. As workers and leadership realise society's interests are not being met by ANC government economic policy, they will do the unthinkable: question the existence of the alliance.

The alliance's future

76% of workers interviewed in 1994 believed that the Tripartite Alliance should

fight the 1999 elections. This support for the alliance has decreased. In 1998, 64% of workers believed that the alliance should contest the 2004 elections. While support for the alliance has declined, the majority of workers still think the alliance should continue to exist. However, when the organised working class confronts the country's policy and political challenges, there are bound to be serious consequences for the alliance. Various things may happen:

Possibility one

The alliance is most likely going to continue given that 70% of workers interviewed thought it is the best way to safeguard worker interests in Parliament. For COSATU this would mean continuing a strategy of support and opposition, depending on whether the government is doing something in support of wider interests in society, or not. Serious tensions and even splits will continue to exist within the alliance.

Another possibility within this scenario is that the alliance partners work together and co-govern. This would include the parties renewing their commitment to a common socio-economic policy programme that accommodates all their interests. There is already a shift in this direction, at the level of leadership, with the adoption of a common alliance programme in October 1998 called Unity in Action.

The alliance would also provide hands-on political leadership on issues confronting the country. If this is going to work, parties in the alliance must jointly decide on the Cabinet's composition and the appointment of premiers and mayors.

Possibility two

While there are serious political differences and problems within the tri-partite alliance, a

worker-led decomposition of the left is unlikely to take place immediately after the 1999 general election. Only 0,9% of workers stated that another party could serve workers' interests. Only 3,4% thought workers should form their own political party. 13,4% of workers stated that COSATU should not align with any political party and only 3,4% said that workers' interests could best be represented by the SACP

alone. In short, most workers believed that the Tripartite Alliance - not a single party - is the best political vehicle to transform South Africa and advance their political interests.

Possibility three

It is unlikely that the leaders within the alliance will be co-opted in the immediate future. However, there are trends and developments that point to this possibility actually taking place. A break with the tradition of worker control in COSATU could mean that the alliance could be co-opted. There is still strong shopfloor organisation within COSATU. However, some unions are beginning to become bureaucratic and are not involving workers in decisions. For instance, leaders are negotiating without mandates. Organising is being professionalised and is thus becoming a career stepping stone. This is linked to the union's pre-occupation with investments through their investment arms. Most unions' investment arms are not accountable to union members and are increasingly becoming the seedbed for corruption and self-enrichment.



Tensions will rise in the alliance if the ANC government continues to implement GEAR.

Another trend that could lead to assimilation and co-option is political careerism. Some unionists are attracted to the large salaries that are paid to politicians and are considering abandoning the movement and pursuing political careers. This is reinforced by a political culture of patronage which forces a self interested loyalty to the political centre at the expense of political principles - to survive politically you have to purge radicalism

Conclusion

Given workers' expectations that they will be able to exert worker control over parliamentarians and over alliance partners, the challenge will be making this happen. This means we need to rethink how the alliance partners work together. We also need to constantly educate workers on public policy and its implications. More fundamentally, we need to assert a working class agenda within the alliance and broader society ★

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