

COSATU and the challenge of the Asian economies

By *ROB LAMBERT*

In November 1994, the leadership of the newly emerging independent unions from 15 countries in the Indian Ocean and Asia regions met in Australia to exchange experiences and to develop strategy. COSATU leaders once again played a key role in this meeting.

A shifting global economy

Delegates reflected on the dramatic changes in the world economy and what this meant for labour. The World Bank predicts that the next 25 years will see the biggest shift in the structure of the global economy for more than a century. The Asian economies look set to outstrip economic growth anywhere else in the world. China will overtake the United States as the world's largest economy and nine of the world's top 15 economies will be from the Third World.

What are the implications for COSATU and the South African working class of this momentous change? Shouldn't we be glad about this? Isn't the rich north-poor south divide changing very rapidly? What's to stop the new South Africa leaping into this big league?

The answers to these questions depend on one's views on the position and status of the working class as well as the political and economic rights of

labour movements in the new global economy.

Undermining worker rights

The issue is critical because Asian countries are now achieving a breakneck expansion of their manufacturing sectors due to state denial and restriction of workers' rights to organise. Child labour — the labour of teenage girls — forms the foundation stone of this expansion. They are forced to work a 12 to 16-hour working day for a mere R2 a day. Health and safety standards are non-existent.

So, South Africa cannot join the big growth league unless it cuts back on the historic gains of labour over the past two decades.

In the short to medium term, COSATU is strong enough to resist such a move. In the longer term, once the South African economy deregulates under pressure from the new World Trade Organization, Asian labour conditions will undermine labour rights and standards in South Africa as they are now doing in Australia.

The challenge to COSATU

It is therefore critical that the COSATU leadership face this challenge now. COSATU needs to develop a long-term strategy to counter these inevitable pres-

tures by committing itself to promoting the growth of strong, independent unionism across Asia.

Over the past six years COSATU has played a key leadership role in the development of an effective network of the leadership of the newly emerging unions in the Indian Ocean and Asian regions. At the past three conferences, the COSATU delegation led many of the debates and formulated a number of key resolutions.

Supporting unionisation

When COSATU leaders meet in April to debate international strategy, the issue of international affiliation should not distract from the most urgent task of supporting and encouraging the growth of these independent unions in the newly emerging centre of the world economy.

COSATU can achieve this by becoming even more deeply committed to the Indian Ocean regional initiative, which has become the largest grouping of Third World unions in the world.

COSATU's six years of commitment to this venture needs to be further strengthened. The April workshop can ensure this. This is crucial because the vested interests of the powerful who benefit so directly from the brutal exploitation of Asian labour are campaigning against the initiative. They would like us to cease to exist. They ridicule our efforts to organise effectively. If we were insignificant, they would ignore us. Because we are growing in strength, they attack us mercilessly.

If we were to abandon the initiative in the face of these vicious attacks, Asian labour's brave attempt to organise would be stranded. The independent unions would be on their own.

We cannot allow this to happen. The leadership of Asia's new independent

unions look to COSATU's April meeting with hope. They know COSATU will not abandon them. SACTU's statement, 'An injury to One is an Injury to All', forged in the historic struggles of the 1950s and revived by COSATU in the 1980s, is not merely a slogan. It is a call to action, to solidarity, taken in the knowledge that the daily injuries to the Asian working class will seriously undermine all prospects of change in the new South Africa. ☆

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