



Tensions are increasingly evident in COSATU between national decisions and local initiative, between efficiency and participation. BOBBY MARIE* argues that the trade union movement is in danger of losing its traditions of militancy and democracy. "Quick fix" improvised styles of work will not solve the problem.

COSATU faces crisis

"Quick fix" methods and organisational contradictions

There have been significant changes recently in the context in which unions organise in SA, as well as within union organisation itself. These changes have brought to the fore organisational contradictions which challenge the traditions of militancy and democratic participation.

Trade unions in South Africa** have been remarkable for their political militancy as well as their success in attending to the day to day needs of their membership. The union movement is distinguished from other mass organisations by the level of accountability to membership shown by its leadership and by the

active participation of its membership in the decision making process and negotiating campaigns.

COSATU, a federation of 14 industrial unions with a paid up membership of over one million is not only one of the biggest union federations in the South (Third World) but also one of the best organised. And compared with trade unions in the North (Britain, the rest of Europe and North America), COSATU stands out as a living example of the possibility of a militant worker controlled trade union organisation.

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** This refers only to progressive black trade unions that emerged after the 1973 strikes, and more specifically to unions today affiliated to COSATU.

What has changed?

Between the period of the 1970s and the 1990s, South Africa has experienced major economic and political shifts. Union organisation that grew in this period was not only an agent of change but subject to changes itself.

Size and organisational complexity

Over the last five years, unions have grown to three or four times their original

size through mergers and recruitment of new members. This has set off a series of changes:

- Unions have a larger proportion of new members, shop stewards and staff (as compared to older and more experienced staff) who have only a vague recollection of the struggles of the 1980s and virtually no knowledge of the 1970s.
- A larger membership, spread through the length and breadth of the country, has necessitated complex and nationally centralised structures. The result is a greater division of labour and responsibilities between structures and among staff. For the first time, unions now have internal departments and have begun to employ specialist staff at national level. While these structural changes have been made, staff and office bearers have not adapted to working within them.
- A bigger and more complex organisation creates more issues for meeting agendas, and decision making has become a tortuous and inefficient process. The level of understanding and participation among rank and file is on a steady decline. The inability to devise effective solutions to information



Bobby Marie

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flow, and internal communication problems, accelerates this decline in understanding and participation.

- The demand for services from membership has increased significantly, and inexperience coupled with organisational inefficiency threaten the image of the unions as organisations that 'deliver' on the day to day problems.

Issues and negotiating strategy

Up to the mid 1980s, the key issue for unions was to recruit membership, establish basic trade union rights and improve wages and working conditions at plant or factory level. The issues were simple and allowed workers and shop stewards direct participation in the negotiations.

New patterns have emerged in the 1990s. Organisers no longer spend long hours outside factory gates waiting to catch new recruits on the early shift. Issues relating to basic rights of unions and individuals on the factory floor have been clarified in law and are settled in the courts. Local problems relating to rights are now seen as procedural ones.

Having to service a large membership in a declining economy, unions have begun to move away from local plant level negotiations (where decisions are now only implemented) to the national company and industry level where policy is formulated and key decisions are made.

The restructuring initiatives of the state and capital aimed at protecting bosses' profits have forced the issue of job security and job creation high up on union negotiating agendas. Unions

today are devoting a fair amount of their skilled personnel and resources to research and negotiation at a national level. COSATU's demand for a national economic negotiating forum is a logical next step in this progression.

This has impacted significantly on the participation of the members on the ground. The issues appear abstract. If made real, they are seen as too complex. The negotiations are long and drawn out and the forums are not visible from the ground.

Management strategy

The 1970s and much of the 1980s saw an insecure management terrified of the 'communist onslaught'. Unionists were not only kept outside the factories but were often evicted from the very pavements in front of the gates.

However, management has since learned they can get a better advantage over union leadership serving them tea across shiny board room tables than paying *impimpi* agents to record the goings on in canteen toilets or dark hostel corridors. Influenced by international trends in 'human resources development' management in South Africa has begun to put more money and more sophisticated strategies into dealing with labour.

Bigger companies are starting to develop long-term plans related to 'worker participation' as a solution to productivity problems. The young inexperienced organiser expecting to face an aggressive *boer* on the other side of the table, now has to deal with professional consultants trained in the use of labour law and well informed on the politics and strategies of COSATU. There are cases where organisers discover, to their great confusion, managers who are card-carrying ANC members.

Political context

February 2nd both gave and took away from the union movement. The freeing of political space has opened the way for unions to expand their influence beyond industry to the national economy itself. However, the negotiation process started on 2 February was also designed to take away.

The union movement of South Africa

shaped itself both as a conventional union organisation as well as a 'resistance front'. The culture which constituted the base of unions was one of resistance: "We are a part of the oppressed masses, we are in the forefront of the struggle". This political and moral commitment challenged individuals to make enormous personal sacrifices and push the union movement into achievements well beyond the resources available. What 2 February took away was the political challenge which provided a natural bond and coherence.

The organisational impact

The changes set out above have, in different ways and in combination, impacted on union organisation - challenging traditional organisational forms and practises. COSATU affiliates differ in size and level of organisation. However, problems observable in the bigger affiliates, have a bearing on problems experienced by all affiliates.

Decline of the union local

The local shop stewards councils, particularly since the mid 1970s, were the melting pot for ideas and actions that later developed into major national campaigns. The local was a vibrant centre for worker education and activity and could not be ignored in the formulation of national union policy.

In the 1990s, the major point of conflict, and therefore the site for the generation of new ideas, moved to the national level. The factory battle over recognition or unfair retrenchment is no longer significant for union direction. The future of the union is seen in the breakthroughs on national bargaining forums and the formulation of industrial policy.

Local agendas are dominated by the very many issues that come from 'head office' which require mandates for national policy or national action. Given the fact that a large number of these issues are complex, or of only long term importance, there is very little discussion and the local agenda often turns out to be a long briefing session.

Local problems tend to be factory problems



COSATU launch 1985: seven years later, a danger of weakening worker control

Photo: Labour Bulletin Photo Library

which could easily be resolved by the local organiser and shop stewards and therefore do not come onto the agenda or are not allowed to. In short, the local has become a function of the national, the passive recipients of national directives.

'Worker control' outmoded

'Worker control' in union practice meant that every issue, whether political or administrative, was first to be discussed in the local councils where a position was taken only after a mandate from the factory floor was received.

Representatives to regional and local structures were seen as simple bearers of the mandate.

This approach to representation was functional in the early period of the unions' growth when the organisation was smaller, the issues were simple and were related to problems that the local could identify. However, with the development of the national level and the need to make decisions on complex, long term issues, the usefulness of the old process of decision making is today seriously questioned.

It is not a simple task to 'send down the structures' issues that take six to twelve months to formulate in national planning and research groups. The 'policy workshop/conference'

approach - where selected regional representatives attend a workshop/conference on key policy issues before taking these down to regional and local structures - is useful to an extent in conveying information. It does not in itself resolve the problem of involving locals in decision making.

Today the practice of 'worker control' has become cumbersome if not impractical. The failure to find a solution to this problem has resulted in a decline in the level of participation, particularly at local levels of the union. Fewer shop stewards and officials have a full grasp of the issues and these are concentrated in the regional and national levels.

Problems of staff and resources

Building on scarce resources and limited skills, the unions evolved an organisational approach that was well adapted to working within these limits. The stress has always been on devising tools, methods and approaches to deal with the immediate tasks.

New staff, largely recruited from among shop stewards, developed their skills 'on the job'. There were no formal systems, procedures or defined approaches. Integration was facilitated by the old and more experienced working

alongside the new.

The tasks have now changed but not so the tools, methods and approaches. In the present context, the new recruit is required to set to work with little or no supervision and perform tasks without clear guidelines. It has become the practice that each staff person devises not only his/her own style of work but also particular procedures and systems of work.

Thus, when there is a change in staff, the new person virtually starts afresh. Staff 'thrown in at the deep end' do not necessarily learn to swim. More often than not they simply learn to keep afloat. It is not surprising therefore that 'staff discipline' is perceived as a major source of the problem.

The strength of the past is often the point of weakness of the present. This is true in regard to union staff discipline and conduct. Being a worker in a union demonstrated a political commitment and a willingness to stand against the harassment of a repressive state.

The unions, it has been argued, do not have the luxury of normal offices and traditional staff practises. There was a strong tendency to see division of labour, levels of authority, systems of work, disciplinary procedures and codes of conduct etc. as reformist and bureaucratic practises that could not be applied to 'comrades in the struggle'.

These ideas of the old still prevail in the new political and organisational context. Staff tend to feel insecure when changes are suggested, fearing an introduction of the 'bosses' system into the unions. Individuals opportunistically use the old ideas when they are caught out on poor discipline.

An alternative approach

Union leadership, understandably, tend to resort to the 'quick fix' when faced with the maze of organisational problems and a simultaneous escalation in the demands on the organisation to deliver services. The 'quick fix' approach means:

- diverting major resources and personnel time to what are perceived to be urgent and strategic issues - which are invariably the

national and political policy issues - to the neglect of all other issues, particularly internal organisational and local issues;

- placing responsibility on very few, and mainly national people to be involved in several issues at the same time, and performing none of them in a systematic and intensive way;
- drawing in 'specialists' and 'experts' from outside the unions to deal with matters that could and should be handled by the organisation;
- seeing the problem of staff efficiency and effectiveness as a problem of discipline and the lack of authority of national officials;
- reducing the problem of participation in the union to a problem of communication from national to local.

The 'quick fix' - or improvised - approach simply perpetuates the problem. National leadership becomes overloaded and increasingly ineffective. Local leadership becomes passive and uncreative.

It is important, as a starting point towards an alternative organisational approach, to reaffirm important organisational experiences and principles on which the union movement in South Africa has been built.

All significant shifts in labour law and wages and working conditions were the result of direct actions by workers at both local and national level. Leadership initiatives were important to create the legal space, to open out new bargaining forums and so on.

However, this leadership was nothing without the 'rolling strikes', the hundreds of 'illegal strikes', and the organising and mobilising efforts of the many local organisers and shop stewards on the ground.

In the final analysis, it was the commitment and creativity of local leadership and organisation that was the strength of the union movement. The quality of organisation that was created cannot be reproduced by functionaries.

What organisational approach, what programme must be adopted that would recreate that level of participation and creativity in the new organisational context?

This is obviously a question that requires much more discussion. The following are mere pointers in this discussion.

Restoring base creativity and building national initiative in a simultaneous process

Issues that relate to the national economy and industry are logically connected to the day to day problems of workers in the local workplace. However, this connection is not obvious in relation to the very specific issues that shop stewards and organisers have to deal with on the ground. The connection therefore remains a theoretical one.

Organisers and local leadership must be sufficiently skilled and informed to handle all day to day issues (wages, retrenchments etc) in a way that broadens workers' understanding of the issues and the unions' long term national programme. National programmes need to be developed in a way that facilitates this link up.

For this to be possible it requires :

- a commitment by union leadership to rebuild workplace structures and support local action as important indicators of union strength. This would mean that busy national leaders may have to create time in their overbooked diaries to become involved in local actions on a programmed basis. (I am not referring to 'walk abouts' or other variations being developed by national political leaders.);
- creating a programme making the increase in skills and creative abilities of local organisers and shop steward leadership as urgent and strategically important as national political policy issues;
- rebuilding organisational efficiency, particularly the information and communication process 'top down' as well as 'bottom up'.

Reviewing and making appropriate structural changes

The practice of 'discussing every issue in every structure' has proved to be neither democratic nor efficient. Union leadership, particularly at the local levels, need to

overcome the fear that delegation of decision making powers will necessarily lead to elitist and bureaucratic leadership. Rather it is the inefficiencies resulting from the 'every issue every structure' approach which is creating the conditions for the development of a bureaucracy.

Unions need to determine what issues need to be discussed and decided upon at the various levels and a distinction made between policy issues and implementation of policy. Office bearers and elected officials must be given clear executive powers, and the system of accountability must be strengthened. The transition to this level of efficiency will require a very lengthy and painful process of discussion and debate in the union.

Strengthening worker leadership

The reorganisation of the union will increase the responsibility of the elected shop stewards, particularly the national office bearer leadership. A very key element in the effectiveness of worker leaders is the time that they have available to perform their duties. The ruling that all office bearers must be elected shop stewards, and therefore in full time employment at a workplace organised by the union, has ensured that leaders of the union are 'from the factory floor'.

The question arises, however, as to how effective such leaders are in performing their tasks? To what extent are they reduced to being token leaders - with the power firmly located in the hands of full time officials? Will the change to having office bearers who are full time in their union posts not create new and complex problems?

The answer to these questions are not simple, but the problem to be faced is that office bearers in the new organisational context have greater responsibilities and require more time to perform their tasks.

An alternative leadership style

The main actor in the process of reorganisation is the full time national official, in particular the secretary.

National secretaries in the union movement



COSATU EXCO 1992 - taking major initiatives, but is the base with them?

Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin

have an average of fifteen years service in the union movement. These years have been a period of intense activity and high stress. The strength of this layer of union leadership is, above all, their ability to "survive". This may, unfortunately, also be a source of weakness. The new context requires more than the ability to cope with problems. It requires the energy to change and reform old practises, structures, policies and systems.

Full time officials carry a wealth of experience created by the years of workers struggle. What are the conditions /approaches that must be created for the transfer of this experience to the large army of new staff employed by the unions? This is yet another complex question. However some starting points can be identified:

- Officials, in particular national secretaries, must treat organisational issues as being equally important to the new political issues confronting the union.
- Experienced officials must, more specifically, organise their time so that they are accessible to other staff in the union.

Structural changes, training programmes, the creation of systems of work are meaningless without the supervision of the inexperienced by the experienced

- Senior officials must work in a manner that is an example and that empowers the people they work with. New staff in all organisations tend to emulate the style of their 'seniors' and can be both positively as well as negatively influenced.
- Unions must resist the tendency for secretaries to conflate their elected positions with their personal and political careers.

Union leaders need to bear in mind that the problem of bureaucracy does not simply arise from a change in heart and mind of the leaders. It arises more from the inability to find solutions to the objective tensions between national decisions and local initiative, between efficiency and participation. Further, the solution to organisational problems cannot be reduced to new structural charts and additional staff. Organisational change is an ongoing process and requires structured involvement. ☆