

## Ceppwawu's **Night of the Long Knives**

*The impact of the split within the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers Union (Ceppwawu) last year was clearly reflected in the case study published in the previous Labour Bulletin. **John Apolis**, one of the key union officials initially suspended, and then dismissed, from the union, gives a personal account of what happened and what he calls a 'political purge.'*

It is now close to a year since the national leadership of Ceppwawu embarked on a political purge in its Witwatersrand region, the biggest region. The purge involved the suspension and subsequent dismissal of the entire regional office bearers, including the regional secretary, the dismissal of the majority of the union officials in the Wits Region and the suspension of many shop stewards. Many of the suspended and dismissed shop stewards and union officials were long standing militants in the union and Cosatu. This political purge caused hundreds of shop stewards and members to leave the union.

### **The suspensions**

On 6 May last year the National Executive Committee (NEC) of Ceppwawu suspended four Wits regional office bearers (Wits ROB) and three NEC delegates from the Wits Region. The NEC also decided that the national leadership must take over the running of the region and appointed two officials (nicknamed the 'Bush

Regime') to take over the functions of the suspended regional secretary. The main reason advanced for the suspension was that the Wits Region failed to facilitate an investigation into a controversial proposal 'Call for a Workers' Referendum on the Alliance and 2004 National Elections', contained in a Wits Regional Discussion Document. The regional leadership was accused of not facilitating the visit of the national leadership to Wits Regional Locals so that the investigation could be undertaken.

The Wits Region, involving hundreds of shop stewards, rejected outright any investigation into the Call for a Workers Referendum, saying it amounted to political intimidation and suppression of democratic voices in the union. Instead, the Wits Region demanded that the national leadership come to a regional shop steward council to hear the voice of shop stewards on the referendum. This rejection of the investigation was a mandated position and for daring to put this mandate to the NEC, the regional leadership was

suspended and subsequently dismissed.

### **Background to the referendum**

The call for a workers' referendum arose out of a comprehensive assessment of worker responses to the Cosatu October 2001 two-day general strike against privatisation. The Wits Region and its five Local Shop Stewards Councils observed two distinct forms of response to the general strike on the part of union members

Firstly, there were sections of union members who actively took up the 'call to arms' by Cosatu and participated in the marches on the first day of the general strike, especially in Johannesburg. This support was sparked off by the privatisation, particularly of Telkom, and the political attacks launched against Cosatu ahead of the action by President Thabo Mbeki. The political labelling of Cosatu leaders as 'ultra-leftists' by the ANC president jolted the workers into active defence of the federation. In fact, barely a week before the general strike there were real

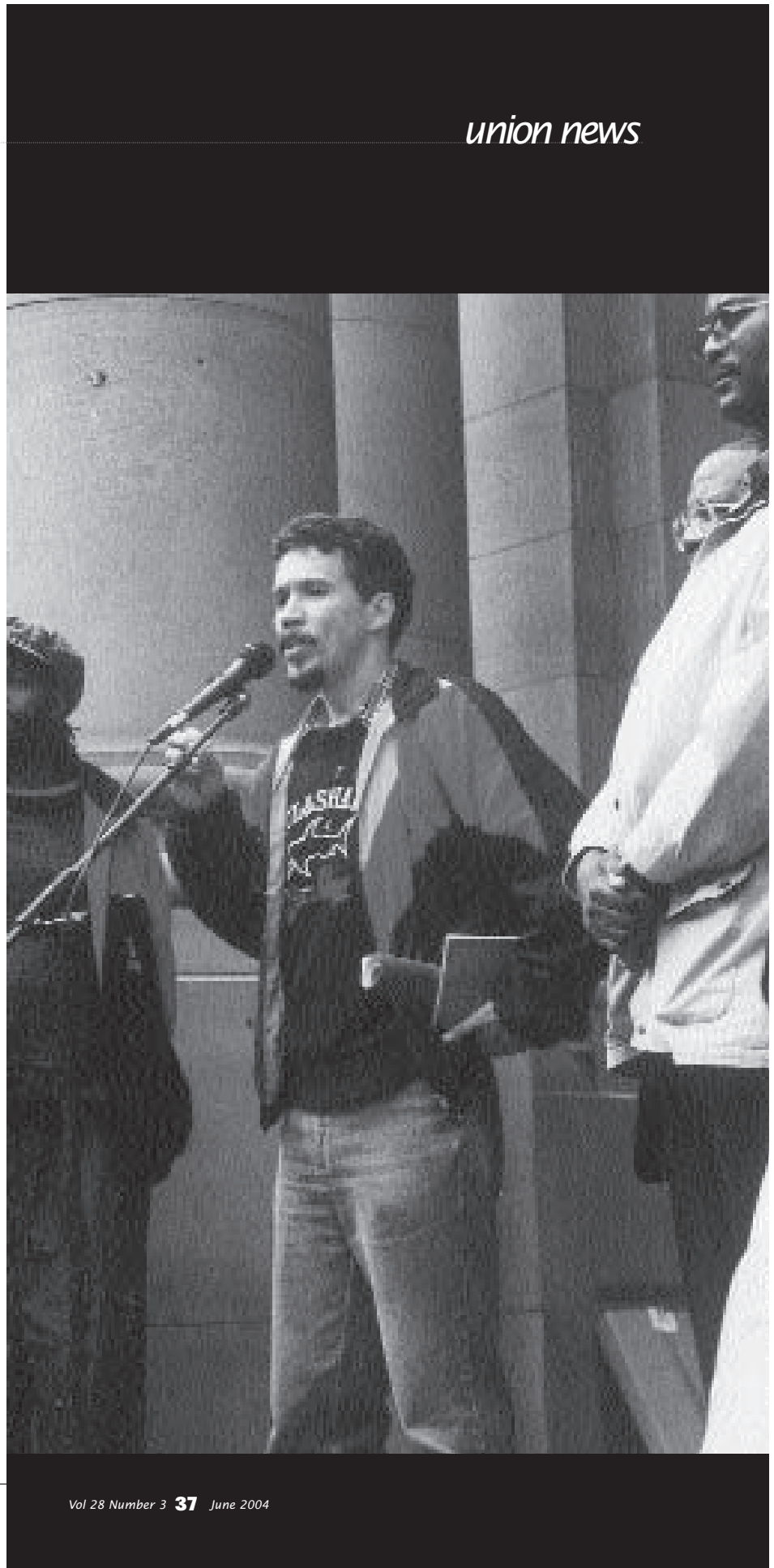
concerns within Cosatu that many workers might not respond to the strike call because of the low level of activity in unions. The support for the strike translated into a vote of no confidence in the ANC government.

Secondly, there were sections of union members who did not heed the strike call. Although opposed to privatisation, these workers wanted to send a political message to Cosatu through their non-participation. Many thought (and probably still think) the tripartite alliance is a dead weight on the ability of the federation to fight privatisation and other anti-working class ANC policies. For these workers it does not make sense to be in the same political bed as the agency that is driving privatisation.

Those sentiments were not far off the mark because, before and during the general strike, the leading lights of Cosatu were at pains to pour cold water onto the hot political feelings of workers. Statements were attributed to the federation that 'the strike is not political'; 'the strike is not directed at the ANC and the government'. These statements not only sent confusing signals to union members, they also amounted to an attempt to de-politicise a very political issue.

The proposal for a workers' referendum on the alliance and 2004 elections was, therefore, an attempt to close the widening gap between union members and their leadership. It was mooted to ensure that the voice of union members found an echo within Ceppwawu and Cosatu, and that their voice reflected the political cross-roads reached by the trade union movement.

It was hoped that through the workers' referendum Cosatu could prepare in a mass way for its upcoming national congress in September 2003. From developments over the past years the mass involvement of union



members in political decisions of Cosatu has become a matter of life and death for the trade union movement. A notion has grown amongst workers that the federation is merely using them, because between elections Cosatu engages in fierce class battles with the ANC government but when the national election approaches, Cosatu is turned into the ANC's election machine.

Instead of facilitating a democratic debate on the workers' referendum, the Ceppwawu national leadership embarked on a political witch-hunt by calling for an investigation into the workers' referendum.

#### **Resistance to the suspension**

There was concerted resistance to the suspension of the Wits regional leadership. The majority of the shop stewards in the region and the union officials (organizers and administrators) rejected the suspension. The union's national treasurer resigned in solidarity with the Wits region's rejection.

Resistance to the suspension took different forms but the main aim was to get the suspensions lifted. For instance, a committee of the majority of local chairpersons took over the running of the region in opposition to the imposed 'Bush Regime'. Union members suspended their subscriptions and marches were organised to the union head office as well as a special NEC. A major part of the resistance of the campaign was a programme of non-cooperation with the national leadership and the 'Bush Regime' so that meetings convened by them were boycotted by shop stewards causing many meetings not to function.

#### **Response from national leadership**

The national leadership responded in a typical bureaucratic fashion. They told members that failure to pay membership fees would mean they

were no longer union members; they called the SAPS to guard meetings and even used members of Popcru for this purpose. The leadership went so far as to lock the offices and put in security guards and banned the distribution of alternative information in other regions and locals. They also instituted a defamation suit against one of the local office bearers – suing for R500 000 – and sought and failed to obtain a Labour Court interdict to prevent me from acting as a regional secretary. The national leadership ignored a Labour Court order that declared the suspension of the regional leadership unconstitutional and suspended the regional leadership for a second time. Our struggles for democracy and freedom of expression were rubbished as that of an Anti-privatisation Forum (APF) inspired split.

#### **At the heart of the struggles**

The Wits region was in the forefront in ensuring that Ceppwawu remained strong and vibrant. However, in most cases the region was increasingly regarded as a political problem by the national leadership. To illustrate this, the following two issues will be highlighted:

##### *Financial mismanagement*

During 2000 it became clear that the union was in a serious financial crisis that was largely due to mismanagement which allowed huge overspending. This financial crisis resulted in workers having to pay a once-off levy of R20. The Wits region challenged this mismanagement of worker money and proposed a vote of no-confidence in the national leadership. This was rejected by the NEC in April 2001, and it was decided that the vote of no-confidence proposal should be investigated. Again the aim of the investigation was to intimidate and suppress critical views

within the union. The national leadership came to a Wits Regional Shop Steward Council where they were told in very strong terms that the vote of no-confidence was a regional mandated position. They were also told not to waste union monies by conducting useless investigations.

##### *Masibambane Unemployed Project (MUP)*

In April 2002, the Wits region started an initiative to organise retrenched and dismissed members of Ceppwawu in line with a decision taken at its regional congress in 2001. This initiative formed part of an attempt to organise the unemployed and bring about unity between the employed and unemployed. The MUP together with the Wits region initiated the 'First Preference Campaign' where employers were pressurised to re-employ retrenched workers when job opportunities arose. Many marches to companies were organised. The region also took up the pension fund surplus issue as a way of organising the union's unemployed members. This organising drive led to the formation of committees of the MUP in Tsakane, Kwathema, Katlehong and Tembisa. However, the MUP was viewed by the union leadership as a political problem and they attempted to close it down. They claimed it was a front of the APF.

##### **Ceppwawu – an instrument for political suppression?**

More and more, the national leadership was transforming Ceppwawu into an instrument of political suppression. The national leadership went so far as to prohibit people from belonging to other organisations and speaking on behalf of these organisations. For instance, at the NEC that decided on the investigation into the workers' referendum, a resolution was passed stating that no

lected leader of the union must use any public platform/organisation to articulate views contrary to the union's views. The resolution goes further and states that no region can use the service of any organisation or institution that is against the tripartite alliance.

The political witchhunt started well before the suspension of the regional leadership. Following the workers' referendum and the continuation of the Masibambane Unemployed Project, I, as the Wits regional secretary, was accused of being 'incompatible' with the tradition, culture and views of the union. During a meeting with the union's leadership in February 2003, it was stated that 'as his immediate supervisors' the leadership had noted that the Wits region's views of the workers' referendum and MUP are not in line with the union views. They demanded to know what his role as an employee (and supervisor in the region) was in ensuring that workers and shop stewards complied with union policies. It was evident that the Ceppwawu leadership was attempting to resort to capitalist values and measures in order to suppress democratic voices within the union.

#### **Cosatu's role**

Cosatu's national leadership played a problematic role in the union's internal struggle. Without listening to both sides, the Cosatu leadership sided with the Ceppwawu bureaucracy. In fact, the shop stewards and suspended comrades of the Wits region wrote a letter to Cosatu's national and regional leadership requesting a meeting to put their side of the story. In addition, documents outlining the issues involved in the struggle were also sent to Cosatu. This one-sided support is in direct contrast with the ways in which the federation normally deals with

internal union struggles. Normally, attempts are made to get all the facts and commissions set up to determine the truth. This has not been the case.

The only logical explanation for this one-sided response is that the national leadership knew the issues at stake were very important politically. Cosatu leaders know that many workers in the federation and other unions share our sentiments on the political issues in our country. It is clear the Cosatu leadership was not prepared to be seen to be allowing differing views within Ceppwawu – in particular views that were critical of the federation's political orientation.

#### **Bureaucratisation of unions**

As stated above, our struggle was not about splitting the union and dividing workers. Rather our struggle was about ensuring that Ceppwawu remained militant, democratic and worker-controlled. At the centre of the internal struggle was the issue of whether people with differing political views have the freedom of expression to put forward their views within the organisation. Political allegiances were never an obstacle to worker unity. Political tolerance was one of the cornerstones of the trade union movement which flourished over the years within the context of vigorous political differences. The bureaucratic suppression of our democratic voice, the suspension and dismissals, created disunity and the weakening of the union.

#### **Conclusion**

The struggle within Ceppwawu, and Cosatu's role, is a reflection of the increasing bureaucratisation and ossification of the labour movement. For the leading bodies of the federation, the continuance of the tripartite alliance has become a matter

of life and death for their existence as a privileged union bureaucracy. What should be recognised is that this union bureaucracy derives its social status exclusively from being a partner within the ruling bloc of the ANC. Their social and material status in society is thus dependent on them occupying a place within the ruling bloc. But to be able to occupy this place within the ruling bloc they must ensure that the labour movement is subordinated to the hegemony of the ANC government.

There has therefore, developed a growing and deepening symbiosis between the union leadership and the ANC government. This symbiotic relationship is not about the politics or ideals of emancipation of the working class but about the preservation of the privileged material positions of the union bureaucracy. To a large extent it is this relationship that is driving the union leadership to become more and more intolerant of critical voices within the labour movement. Our call for a workers' referendum was a threat to this political arrangement.

*Apolis is the former Wits regional secretary of Ceppwawu. He is now the Wits regional secretary for Giwusa.*

The leadership of Ceppwawu were approached to present their position but have yet to respond to the Bulletin's request. **LB**

