

Chalk and cheese?

SASBO and COSATU

COSATU enters 1998 with a rapidly changing membership. Consistent with international trends, the number of white-collar workers as a proportion of unionised workers is growing steadily. Yet the federation's policies and practices remain very much rooted within its traditional blue-collar constituency.

A few years ago, it would have been unthinkable for SASBO to affiliate to COSATU. Racial divisions fragmented the labour movement into highly politicised black unions and conservative white craft unions.

Threatened by economic changes and industry restructuring, white-collar workers are today more amenable to COSATU. For the federation, what began as an anti-apartheid strategy of winning pockets of skilled white workers, has evolved into the affiliation of white-collar unions. Approximately 37% of COSATU's overall membership now belong to professional unions.

This trend augurs well for the birth of a widely representative non-racial labour federation. Will COSATU be able to adapt its structures and style of organisation to the diverse interests of its changing constituency? Do unions such as SASBO have the will and ability to make the leap that will enable them to become an integrated part of the federation?

SASBO

SASBO's history deserves comment. Formed in 1912, its leadership has always claimed a

Two years after its affiliation to COSATU, SASBO is struggling to integrate its white-collar membership into the federation. Malcolm Ray sees the search for solutions to on-going tensions as a vital challenge to the federation.

non-racial style of organisation. While it accepted government restrictions and confined its membership to white banking staff in the 1960s, it also organised black bank employees into a 'parallel' union known as the South African Bank Employees Union (SABEU).

SABEU was an extremely marginal union. Very few black workers were employed in the sector. When it was integrated into SASBO (following the Wiehahn Commission recommendations) the race and skills mix of the union remained fundamentally unchanged.

SASBO was therefore able to pursue a 'non-racial' policy with relative ease. Its independence from COSATU was, its leaders claim, a result of apartheid restrictions rather than an aversion to join a predominantly black trade union centre.

Affiliation

With the dawning of democracy in 1994, SASBO broke ranks with the Federation of South African Labour (FEDSAL - now FEDUSA) and joined COSATU in early 1995.

SASBO general secretary, Graeme Rowen, highlights the debate in SASBO at the time: "FEDSAL was closing ranks and shifting rightwards at a time when the political and economic playing field was opening up. COSATU, on the other hand, was opening its doors to skilled and professional workers. No other co-ordinating body matched the depth of COSATU's commitment to serving workers, research, contacts, influence in all spheres and muscle when the chips were down. It would be fair to say that we wanted to benefit from a mainstream union movement, rather than sitting around in the doldrums of FEDSAL."

There were also some strong reservations. The union's National Council meeting in May 1995 noted that SASBO's "professional identity and autonomy" in COSATU was a non-negotiable precondition for affiliation. As Rowen puts it, "We had resolved at the time of our affiliation that our autonomy would be protected, our members' interests would be accommodated, and we would reserve the right to abstain from policy matters which are not in our interests."

Tensions

COSATU and SASBO's relationship has not been easy. SASBO abstained from key political and socio-economic debates at COSATU's 6th National Congress last year - a clear indication of unresolved tensions built up over the past two years. The union has found itself at loggerheads with the federation on virtually every major executive decision since its affiliation, the most noteworthy being the stalemate over COSATU's condemnation of the banks for allegedly supporting the increase in interest

rates last year. On that occasion, SASBO accused the COSATU leadership of adopting a policy that undermined the interests of banking employees.

The problem was eventually resolved, only to be followed by SASBO's criticism of COSATU deputy general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi's, comment in *Business Report* early last year, in which he accused whites of "protecting the wealth they accumulated during apartheid by appointing blacks into token management positions."

Craft identity

For its part, COSATU has criticised SASBO for the slow pace at which it is going about transforming the composition of its membership.

The fact of the matter is that the union merely mirrors the racial composition of the finance sector. SASBO's uneasy position in the federation has less to do with race than the craft identity of its members.

Rowen points to four areas in which his union differs from other COSATU affiliates:

- ☐ SASBO operates in a prosperous industry with reasonably enlightened employers who realise the importance of having a stable, contented, motivated and relatively well-paid workforce.
- ☐ Because of the shared commitment of the union and management to these principles, SASBO and employers usually settle their differences amicably in the negotiating chamber. SASBO members tend to be cautious about the use of industrial action.
- ☐ The majority of SASBO's members are professional, specialised, upwardly mobile workers. Most members are committed to spending their working lives within the financial institution.
- ☐ Most SASBO members have a conservative approach to economics and will not adopt policies that might harm

the profitability, market strength, or stability of the finance sector. SASBO's economic stance is closer to the government and business than COSATU. In his submission to COSATU's September Commission last year, SWOP deputy director, Ian Macun, noted that the particular occupational positions enjoyed by white-collar workers and the professional culture they embrace, lead to individualism and self interest as opposed to unity and collective interest.

Organisation

Although black unskilled workers in the manufacturing, tertiary and public sectors have advanced into skilled positions, they constitute a minority of COSATU's traditional constituency. Recent studies on unionisation trends have shown that, notwithstanding far-reaching changes in the labour market, COSATU's strength for some time to come will remain its unskilled members.

The patchwork of old organisational forms and new workers means that unions like SASBO will probably remain in permanent opposition to most COSATU affiliates. Rowen argues any mass organisation will need to accommodate differences. The point, he says, is to find ways in which to manage conflict.

However, the union has not come up with any concrete proposals. The problem requires organisational solutions which forge a culture of shared interests and greater unity amongst all sections of workers. Macun argues that the first step is to modify the way white-collar workers and their organisations are viewed. He cautions against viewing white-collar workers as a "static single group": "Non-manual workers who are in positions with different career processes...with little contact with non-manual workers...would be likely to adopt quite different methods of pursuing their

aims and may have less identification with the wider labour movement... It is (therefore) necessary to look at them in terms of their occupations, the kinds of individuals that occupy certain occupations and kinds of employing organisations within which they are located."

The September Commission itself recommended that COSATU target specific groupings of white-collar workers. Affiliates should debate structures and organisational forms which will be appropriate to these workers. It was also recommended that ongoing research be conducted into the needs and concerns of white-collar workers and the success and failure of affiliates to develop effective organising and bargaining strategies.

Options

It is clear that different forms of bargaining and collective representation are necessary to cater for special interests. Does this mean that SASBO will continue to operate as a purely white-collar union with an inward-looking craft identity? Would this not mean a deepening of divisions rather than the integration of the union into COSATU?

COSATU is naturally opposed to such an arrangement. The federation's recent congress accepted another recommendation by the September Commission: the federation will be restructured into five or six 'super unions' through a process of mergers and partnerships in broadly defined economic sectors. It is hoped that fewer bigger affiliates will enable unions to intervene more decisively in the sectors and develop more coherent policies.

The implications of this strategy for SASBO are enormous. In terms of the resolution, SASBO, TGWU and CWU will merge into a single service sector union. It is unclear what sort of structure and collective bargaining arrangements will be set up to co-ordinate activities and accommodate the

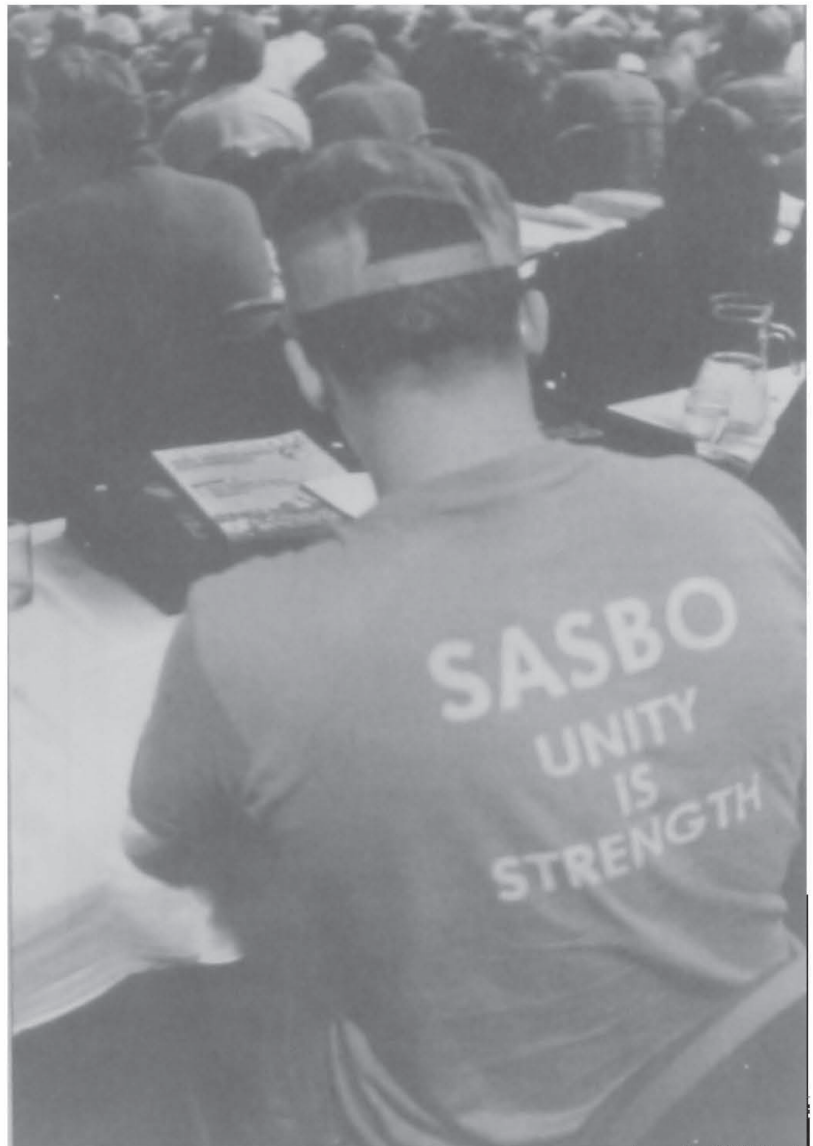
various interests of workers in the sector.

It is also unclear whether the structure of the union will be shaped by sectional and occupational variation and the vastly different membership bases of the three affiliates, or by broader industry demarcation considerations. The idea is nevertheless a positive move towards breaking down traditional barriers to worker unity. Theoretically, it would allow SASBO to blend into the federation and grapple in a more pro-active way with the concerns of less advantaged workers through integrated union structures and collective bargaining processes.

Chalk and cheese

SASBO's leadership is understandably jumpy at this prospect. Says Rowen, "Lumping SASBO with TGWU and CWU is the difference between chalk and cheese. We have a sophisticated membership and vastly different wage policies and approaches to collective bargaining, all of which clash with the other unions. We can't see the rationale for such a move. Neither can we see our members agreeing to collapse their identity in an amorphous cartel."

For SASBO, the idea of a super union is based on the false assumption that merging will cure the problem of overlapping sectors and poaching. Rowen says that "while the problem of poaching might be partially resolved in a giant union, deeper problems of organisation will remain. In fact, a unitary structure might sharpen divisions, lead to friction among different workers and destroy the unity which super unions are aimed at building." Such a union might make sense to blue-collar unions like TGWU



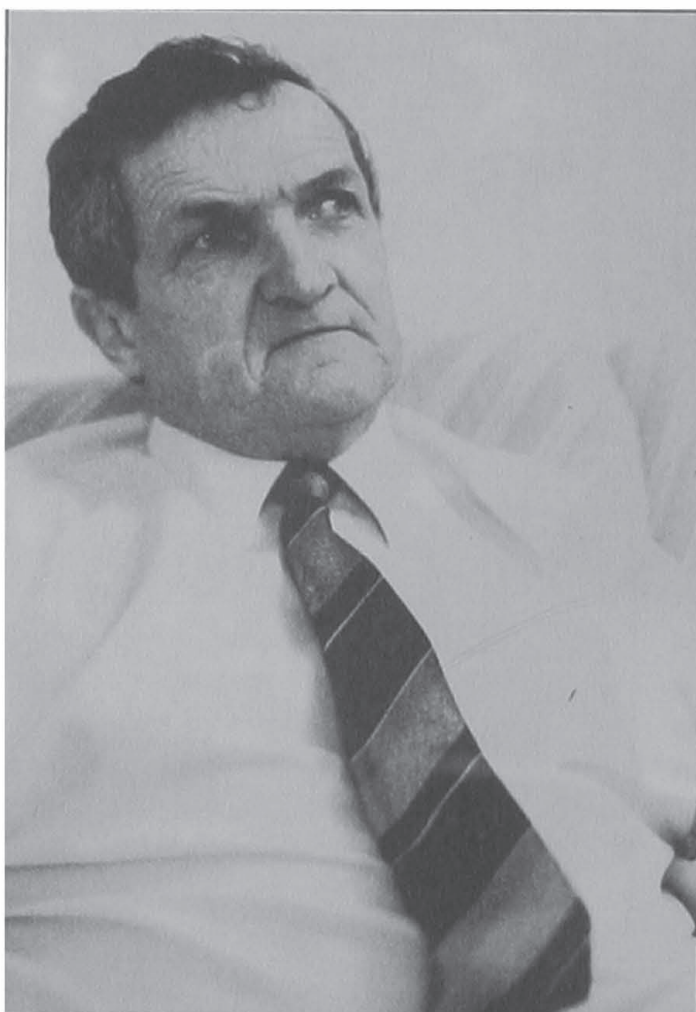
SASBO delegate at the COSATU congress.

which stand to gain in terms of size, but more innovative responses and strategies might need to be formulated to accommodate SASBO's interests.

Way forward

There is no easy way out of the problems identified by SASBO. Traditionally, the scope of COSATU's affiliates has been defined by sectoral demarcation. Inter-sectional and occupational divisions have, however, always been present. The lines of division are as deep as ever and will undoubtedly remain so for a long time to come.

Is it possible to hold together such a diverse membership? Or are unions like SASBO better placed outside COSATU? It is



Graeme Rowen, SASBO general secretary.

unrealistic to expect common ground between unions organising under completely different conditions with a different membership base. While TGWU, with pockets of white-collar members, can respond to special individual and group interests through separate structures, bargaining units and even Workplace Forums, SASBO's position in COSATU is far more complex.

As a professional craft union located in a highly specialised sector of the service industry, it is hard to imagine SASBO in a structured relationship with blue-collar workers in significantly different and more general sectors like transport and communications. There is certainly no rationale for joint (central) bargaining forums - which is the core business of unions. The dispersion of workers across

different sectors and occupations will not lend itself to a solidarity of consciousness and social cohesion amongst workers.

SASBO's future in COSATU rests on building a unity of purpose that is mutually beneficial to its constituency and the wider labour movement. Rowen is confident that the union has a future in COSATU as long as it is recognised as the sole union in the finance sector. "We believe that a focused small union is far better than a nebulous super union," he says.

The trouble is that this is a restatement of the *status quo*, which could ultimately see the marginalisation of SASBO and its eventual split from COSATU.

What explains the continued appeal of COSATU for SASBO? For Rowen, the point is not his union's "blind loyalty" to COSATU. "The nature of the finance sector and our members' needs place us in a unique position to make our mark on COSATU's agenda. SASBO's decision to remain in the federation is a simple recognition that times have changed and COSATU must change."

The questions raised by SASBO have far-reaching implications. Professional workers already within the federation - such as teachers and nurses - will no doubt have some of the problems with the 'super union' concept. Other white-collar unions will be drawn to COSATU or stay outside the fold depending on the solutions which the federation comes up with. Creative structures and strategies which accommodate sectional identities and help forge a culture of tolerance will determine both the growth of the federation and whether lasting unity can be achieved.

References

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