

Collective bargaining: Cosatu to confront challenges

At the Collective Bargaining, Organising and Campaigns (CBOC) conference at Boksburg, in March, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, highlighted some of the challenges unions faced. These included how to increase trade union membership and density, providing better service to members, improving union representation and democracy, dealing with social distance and corruption, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

The collective bargaining conference takes place when a two-tier labour market, supported by the International Monetary Fund and the National Planning Commission, was being created. This allowed for 'limitations on collective wage-bargaining not to cover certain categories of workers, minimum wage-differentiation by age, youth wage subsidies, extension of probationary requirements for the newly employed, and wage and price moderation,' said Vavi in his opening remarks.

By rejecting the youth wage subsidies unions' fuelled unemployment argued the Democratic Alliance. But Vavi disagreed. 'It is important to understand that, while unemployment is an intrinsic outcome of the capitalist mode of production, it plays an important role in weakening the power of the working class at the point of production, and in society broadly'.

He called for the implementation of the demands of the Freedom Charter

on education, health and housing, welcomed the National Health Insurance, and that basic services such as water and sanitation be accessible to all.

WEIGHTY RESPONSIBILITY

Vavi said the conference had a huge task on its shoulders when it came to facing up to the challenges as it was 'charged with the very weighty responsibility of charting a clear course for the organised working class – boldly confronting our weaknesses, building on our strengths, and using our decades of experience of working-class struggle to successfully navigate these stormy waters.'

'Capital is in crisis, and it will do everything to smash us from all sides, in order to restore profitability. We thus have to be cool-headed and know the class enemy, even if the enemy wears our colours and is within our midst. Cosatu is the multi-wheeled locomotive of the working class, its wheels are its affiliates, and it is affiliates that are the strategic target. So it is important that we really focus

on our organisational strengths and weaknesses, share experiences and emerge with a common, dynamic strategy and tactics'.

He emphasised the importance of developing recruitment and organising strategies in sectors that employed vulnerable workers, on wage bargaining and a national minimum wage, having legislated centralised bargaining in all sectors, social benefits for workers (social wage), and social protection and on legal battles with the Free Market Foundation.

Above all, unions had to deliver on wages and working conditions, as this was one of the reasons workers' joined and also because it improved workers' livelihoods. 'We are truly called to go back to basics, and reassert the fundamental values and organisational culture of our movement; but also to be creative in the way we exercise the power of worker democracy, under new conditions which are emerging. And develop innovative strategies which rightfully position the trade union movement as a leader of society.'



Nehawu deputy president, Joe Mpsi, Cosatu general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, and Nehawu president Mzwandile Michael Makwayiba at the bargaining conference.

MEMBERSHIP & DENSITY

With a membership of 2.2-million Cosatu aims to reach four-million by 2015 says Vavi who also wants the trade union density to go well above 30%. 'Trade union density of 30% means two out of every three workers are not organised! We have a huge task ahead as a federation, especially amongst the most vulnerable and exploited workers.' By growing numbers it would be possible to build power of the trade union collective through union activities.

He applauded Cosatu affiliates that were experimenting with different forms of organising. For example, South African Commercial Catering Allied Workers Union (Saccawu)'s Mall Committees brought workers of small and big companies together and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was paying special attention to recruiting migrant workers from outside South Africa.

National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) had established a central organising service centre while the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa's) strategy of

employing dedicated ex-shop stewards on a stipend plus bonus basis to work with organisers was paying dividends. Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (Sactwu)'s employment of growth organisers in each province and the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu)'s use of the Occupational Safety and Health Act to get access to farm workers was commendable.

SERVICE TO MEMBERS

Referring to the National Labour and Economic Development Institute (Naledi) workers survey, Vavi said it had important insights including that workers' joined Cosatu for protection against dismissal and unfair discipline (38%). This was followed by the desire for improved wages, benefits and working conditions (33%).

'The remaining 29% told us that they joined the union to change society (9%), or because of peer pressure or a closed shop (5%) or because of union benefits (3%),' he said.

'This tells us that we have to put our efforts first and foremost into successfully defending workers in disciplinary cases and into wage bargaining. And yet the statistics we

have from the CCMA show us that only 46% of cases referred by Cosatu affiliates to arbitration were won in favour of workers. This really is something we have to reflect on, and do something about.'

KNOWING THE ORGANISERS

Vavi highlighted the importance of knowing the strengths and weakness of the union organisers. 'Apart from knowing that between them the affiliates employ around 700 local and provincial organisers, we know very little about our organisers. We can guess that by and large they feel unsupported and dumped into the deep end, but we don't really know enough about their daily work to be able to know what the federation should be doing to develop them'.

Although union members were satisfied with the way the unions took up disciplinary cases, health and safety issues, retrenchments, racism, discrimination against women, and supporting people living with HIV and AIDS the same could not be said with regard to 'wage negotiations where only 40% of our members are satisfied'. Other disgruntlement came from skills development, support given to temporary and casual

workers, fight for better child care and better public transport.

However, potential existed for Cosatu to organise in small towns. 'Small towns, by the way, are where the majority of our organising presence exists (not in overall membership numbers but in numbers of locations). The vast majority of our 236 locals are based in small towns,' said Vavi.

REPRESENTATION & DEMOCRACY

One of the ways to deal with splinter unions was to be a democratic union that represented all members. Remarked Vavi: 'It was encouraging that almost three quarters of members felt they could influence their shop stewards to act on their behalf, and that this proportion is higher amongst Cosatu unions than non-Cosatu unions. But that does mean that one out of every four members feels disempowered. It is this disempowerment, combined with dissatisfaction with service that creates conditions for workers to follow opportunistic individuals.'

'We have so much work to do to reverse the tide of tiny powerless unions springing up all over the place. There are presently 193 registered unions in South Africa, 117 of these do not belong to any of the existing four federations, with multiple unions mostly in the sectors that are the least organised such as catering, wholesale, hotel, cleaning, security, etc.'

Regular elections of shop stewards will also aid democracy in the unions and it is important for members to know the constitutions of their unions as this will make it easy to recall some unpopular shop stewards.

Vavi encouraged unions to have general meetings once every month: 'The general meeting lies at the heart of our mandating and report-back processes. These general meetings should not just take place during peak times, such as wage negotiations. They should take place on a consistent basis.'

The meetings also allowed for accountability and many issues could be put on the agenda.

'There will always be plenty to fill an agenda - whether its development skills, collective grievances, health and safety, or whatever. But holding a general meeting only takes us half way to ensuring accountability. General meetings should never be a one-way street of reporting by shop stewards. They must provide space for members to speak up and discuss. Our shop stewards are all too often messengers either for the union leadership or for management. This is quite the wrong way around.'

SOCIAL DISTANCE

Recently trade unions have been accused of being out of touch with the realities of their members. Union leadership and shop stewards have been said to be too distant from their bases. Even the union movement has been said to be divorced from the working class.

'We have to acknowledge that even at the level of full-time shop stewards, and even more so at the level of elected leadership, we have allowed a situation where a physical and material distance often exists. How often do we hear of full-time shop stewards having absolutely no connection to their original constituency? Sometimes these are elected office bearers, who have not been re-elected by their constituency, and yet get protected by a fudging of their union constitution'.

Material distance also arises when a shop steward is given more benefits than other workers. 'Sometimes in an effort to find a solution to the challenge of a full-time shop steward being taken out of the normal pay and progression structure of a company, we have agreed to conditions, which provide undue privilege. This privilege becomes the source of envy as well as derision (disdain and scorn).

Where it becomes the source of envy it produces leadership battles based not on principle but on material competition. Whether the response of workers is envy or derision, the ultimate product is the same - the creation of conditions ripe for splits and splinter unions'.

Social distance is also created when union leaders start competing with the private sector or government. 'We should also be very careful about the pay and benefits of our officials, including elected officials, and benefits of elected worker leaders or office bearers across the federation and affiliates. We can never, and should never even try, to compete with salaries and conditions in business and government. We would be hypocritical if we were to reproduce the pay gaps that exist outside of our movement. The last thing we want in the federation is a large layer of leadership with increasingly bourgeois interests, who will become unwilling to challenge the economic status quo because of their material conditions.'

If union jobs could not pay as much as the private sector or government then the motivation for one to remain in such a position could be found in job satisfaction. 'This means that our retention strategies need to place a much stronger emphasis on the job satisfaction of making a real contribution to the building of a strong movement, and the building of the political consciousness of our officials. Our officials need to be acknowledged and encouraged. They must be provided with proper supervision, mentoring, and training. We do too little of this. Worker control does not mean that our officials have to be bossed around or derided.'

Cosatu also sought to address the social distance within the working class. 'On the issue of social distance from the poorest sections of the working class, our recruitment drive amongst the most vulnerable