

# coloured workers: *joining* COSATU, *voting* NP?

MIKE COETZEE\* discusses the dilemmas facing COSATU

and the ANC in the Western Cape.

**A** draft survey to be published by the Centre for Development Studies at the University of the Western Cape (*Ethnic consciousness and potential voting behaviour in the coloured community*), made a number of revealing findings.

- The coloured community, who constitute 11% of the SA population (excluding the TBVC territories) has a relatively low level of education.
- The majority are working class. The majority has attained more socio-economic privileges than Africans.
- The majority of respondents in the survey viewed themselves as part of a group classified 'coloured'.
- The community shows a hesitancy in its acceptance of an African as president of South Africa.
- It shows a low level of organisational affiliation and appears to be politically marginalised.
- The overwhelming majority, 74%, support De Klerk as president in a new SA and the NP (62%) as the party they would vote for in an election, as opposed to 9% for the

ANC and 5% for Mandela. The support for the NP is derived from its success in creating an image of itself as the chief architect of the current political changes.

- There is a correlation between education, income and the voting trends of the community. The NP primarily draws its support from the less educated sections of the community and from the low and upper middle income earners.

These survey figures make known a number of facts about the coloured community and do not come as a total surprise to activists in the Western Cape. It therefore justifies the concerns raised by the debate on the 'Coloured Question', but rather a bit too late.

## History of resistance

Although not having a definite political affiliation, the history of resistance of coloured people shows a different pattern from time to time, especially amongst students and youth. In recent times, post 1976 and during the United Democratic Front era, students and youth have been in the forefront of pitched battles with the police and the authorities.

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COSATU's coloured members: who gets their vote in a general election?

Photo: William Matlala

Various communities have been mobilised around specific localised economic and social issues to varying degrees of success. This brought about a relatively strong civic movement in the Western Cape that laid the basis for the foundation and the acceptance of the UDF. Despite the success of the UDF in mobilising members of the coloured community around short term political goals such as the campaign against the Tricameral Parliament, it was unable to entrench a political tradition and loyalty.

No organisation or political formation has been able to establish a political tradition and loyalty amongst the mass of coloured people in the Western Cape to date. The only exception

has been COSATU. At various times COSATU affiliates such as SACTWU have managed to mobilise campaigns, but only around specific campaigns and issues that serve the immediate interests of workers such as the anti-LRA and Living Wage campaigns, but this has only been for a limited duration. The participation of coloured workers in stayaways has also increased in recent times, after extensive mobilisation by COSATU.

A distinct feature is the absence of any form and tradition of political leadership acceptable to coloureds having emerged over the last decade and a half.

**Workers' Day**  
**MAY 1**  
**AN INJURY TO ONE IS AN INJURY TO ALL**

### Consciousness

Despite the UDF era and COSATU's ability to organise large numbers of working class people into its ranks, we still find that coloureds have not become members of political organisations and possess a conservative political consciousness.

Union activists maintain that the political conservatism is confined to rank and file membership, but a ray of sunshine is evident amongst the union leadership and shopstewards.

A number of negative perceptions about the ANC exist amongst coloured workers and are articulated in different forms and sometimes very crudely, being:

- the ANC is an African organisation*
- the ANC is too radical*
- they cannot relate to the national political agenda of the ANC.*

When a union organiser explained the need for unions and their members to have control over their pension and provident fund monies, the first response was, "as long as COSATU does not give our money to the ANC".

### Unionisation

Progressive union organisation has increased dramatically with the launch of COSATU in 1985. However, it has evened off in most sectors, except in the public sector where steady progress is evident.

The level of unionisation in the Western Cape with an estimated economically active population of 3,5 million is very low, with approximately 175 000 members in COSATU and much less in NACTU. The craft unions still find support amongst coloured workers.

Whilst coloured workers tend to identify their economic interests with African workers, they

tend to identify their political interests more with whites, and in particular with the NP.

### Implications

COSATU in the Western Cape finds itself in a very precarious position, being in an alliance with the ANC and the Communist Party, but its members not giving support to this alliance. This poses an organisational and tactical problem.

COSATU, being the only formation with membership and following in this constituency, will be expected to deliver the coloured vote to the ANC in the forthcoming elections. The ANC, with its functioning branches, is sound in the suburbs and middle class coloured areas but displays a marked weakness and absence from the large working class areas.

With the urgent need to define a political strategy for winning the elections, a number of options are being debated:

- The ANC should be remodelled and its image changed if we hope to 'market' it to coloureds in the Western Cape.
- A 'rainbow coalition' of different organs of civil society should campaign on a progressive ticket, being non-hostile and non-antagonistic towards the ANC.
- A coloured political party should be formed, or the ANC should enter an alliance arrangement with the Labour Party.
- COSATU and other organisations should campaign against the NP, but not pro-ANC in the region. This would ensure that the NP gains few votes, and would thus strengthen the position of the ANC.

Whatever the result of this debate, there is a sense of urgency and desperation. ☆

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