

# Consolidating working class power a rejoinder

*Cosatu's 8th national congress adopted what has become commonly known as the 2015 plan or 'Consolidating working class power for quality jobs – Towards 2015'. Jeff Rudin critically evaluates the plan and finds it wanting.*

**C**riticising one's own organisation is never easy. Doing so in public is even more difficult. Most difficult of all is a critical assessment of the political party that played the leading role in the anti-apartheid struggle. Nelson Mandela was fully aware of all these difficulties. He was also aware of how important internal criticism by comrades is for the general health of the movement. This is why, as president, he expected no special treatment from Cosatu. On the contrary, he expressly called on Cosatu to treat the ANC-led government like any other government; to judge it not by sentiment, not by what it says, but remorselessly and entirely by what it does. It is in this spirit that Cosatu's 2015 plan is so very important.

## What is the plan about?

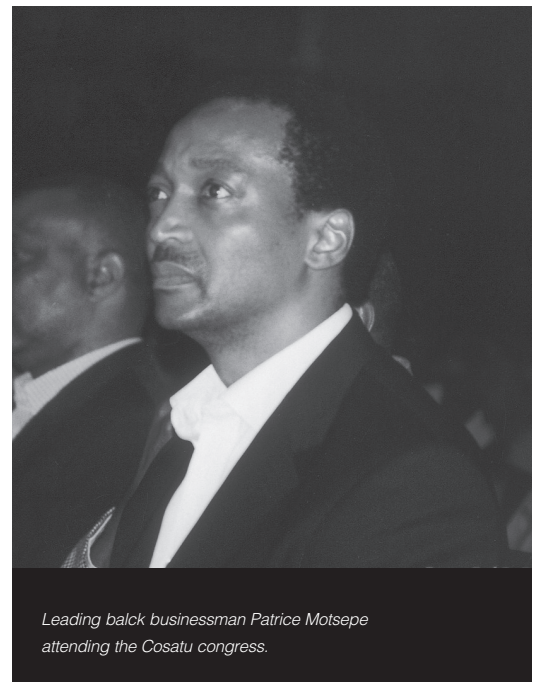
The 2015 plan is divided into two parts with the first providing a critical analysis of the first ten years of democracy and the second seeking to provide a strategy for addressing what the paper sees as the prevailing failures of this period of national democratic revolution (NDR).

The main problem identified by the plan is that the working class (including all other sections of the poor) has lost the leading role it enjoyed for so long

within the ANC. The prioritising of working class interests is best captured, according to the plan, by the ANC's Strategy & Tactics paper of 1969. Thirty-three years later at the ANC's 51st national congress in December 2002, the working class was reduced to being only one of the motivating forces. Joel Netshitenzhe, the ANC's senior strategist and government's head of communications, was less diplomatic. He said workers were no longer the force of change. This view was endorsed by the plan. Its basic premise is that: 'Workers are no longer the primary beneficiaries of the NDR transformations; that position is now firmly occupied by capital and the bourgeoisie.'

## What strategy?

What strategy flows from the above profoundly challenging diagnosis? At this stage the 2015 plan undergoes a marked and incongruent change. The daring that distinguished the first part of the paper is no longer to be found. Similarly, the boldness that enriched the analysis has all but disappeared. Having bravely led us up the mountain, the plan suddenly develops vertigo. A new timidity takes over and is reflected in the plan's title. The strategy to 'Consolidate working class power' has



*Leading black businessman Patrice Motsepe attending the Cosatu congress.*

as its objective nothing more audacious than 'quality jobs'! Even the term 'consolidate' is hugely misleading and entirely inconsistent with the paper's own rigorous analysis. 'Consolidate' implies that the working class is already exercising power yet the plan's point of departure is the very opposite.

The key challenge for Cosatu is the plan's failure to formulate a strategy



that answers its own analysis. While claiming that the challenge is to find a way to 'reassert the leadership of the working class in the national democratic movement', the plan ducks this most critical of all the issues. The plan argues coherently about the dangers if 'workers were to hand the ANC over to the bourgeoisie on a silver plate', but this has already happened and the strategy to win back the ANC to the workers' cause is problematic.

This is no easy challenge. I don't claim to have a proper answer. My contribution is essentially confined to the most basic tier of the strategy. By this I mean issues where Cosatu has to react to situations created by either business and/or the state. With this very limited objective, I offer the following propositions.

The bourgeois takeover automatically places labour on the defensive. Creating a 'business friendly' environment; promoting the growth and development of the black bourgeoisie; and offering South Africa for sale to foreign investors

creates, individually and collectively, a multitude of problems for most South Africans, no less than for organised labour.

How Cosatu responds concretely to these attacks will go a long way either to consolidate bourgeois power or to weaken and dislodge it. No other outcome is possible.

Over the past ten years Cosatu has consistently responded with anger and militant talk to government policy, including all the major labour bills. With few, if any exceptions, the militancy has rapidly evaporated. Government policy ends up being accepted – sometimes with publicly expressed misgivings, often in silence.

Gear (including privatisation) might appear to be an exception to this pattern. But this would be a mistake. Gear was unilaterally introduced in 1996. It is still with us seven years later. Yes, Cosatu has taken industrial action against privatisation but this has not been part of any concerted and coherent programme.

Cosatu called off further militant action at the beginning of 2002 in expectation of Gear being on the agenda of the Growth and Development Summit (GDS). When this much delayed event eventually took place in June, Cosatu accepted government's insistence that there would be no discussion of macroeconomic policy.

The 2015 plan does not explain how the bourgeoisie managed to take over the ANC. It is similarly silent on what organised labour was doing while this handover was taking place. Both processes were undoubtedly complex. However, the labour movements' failure to adequately protect working class interests from incessant assaults forms a major part of the process by which labour has lost its power in the alliance.

This reality must therefore be central to the 2015 strategy. It is only in the actual day-to-day struggle that the working class will reassert their position. One cannot be prescriptive about how this struggle should be run. Concessions to preserve the alliance must be allowed – but only as very rare exceptions. This means a radical reversing of the pattern of the previous ten years. Anything less means that it is the alliance that mediates the handing over of the working class to the bourgeoisie.

The ANC is nothing without the working class which is therefore in a powerful position to assert itself in a way that plainly has not happened during the first ten years of the NDR. If the ANC proves in practice to be unwilling to honour the expectations of the NDR by reflecting the basic and dire needs of most of its members and supporters – the bourgeoisie will have won and we must be bold enough to accept that the ANC has indeed been lost to the workers' cause.

Anything less than such a conclusion, would be to turn Cosatu into the sweetheart union of the bourgeoisie.

This needs to be said loudly and openly. Not doing so serves only to consolidate bourgeois power.

It is easy to say that Cosatu must be far more ready to protect working class interests. But what does this mean in practice? A concrete illustration of the challenges facing Cosatu in the unfolding struggles is provided by the Treatment Action Campaign's (TAC) decision to return to peaceful, civil disobedience. TAC's decision, made shortly after the 2015 plan was released, signifies what putting workers' interests first could mean for Cosatu. The government's subsequent concessions on the use of anti-retrovirals, however, have meant that TAC has not had to implement its decision. But this does not in any way detract from the value of the issue as an example of what being more assertive could mean for Cosatu.

TAC, of course, also powerfully demonstrates what can be achieved through resolute action based on popular mass mobilisation. The TAC's commendable stand on principle has been maintained without it becoming an anti-ANC organisation. This shows the space available within the alliance for similar action by Cosatu.

Whilst the TAC is a single-issue campaign, Cosatu by contrast, has to deal with a multitude of issues from the unaffordability of basic services to unemployment, poverty, privatisation and trade reform. Doing a TAC on any of these issues is ultimately the only way of

returning the alliance to being the prime agency of a popular NDR.

Amongst the items in the plan's strategic list is the creation of a core of shopstewards able to stem and indeed reverse the impact of the bourgeois ideological assault. However, the plan fails to recognise the dilemma facing many shopstewards. It is appropriate to look to shopstewards – in general, the most advanced, able and committed of workers – to act as 'political commissars'. However, it is precisely these qualities that make shopstewards susceptible to bourgeois brandishments and able to benefit from government policies that promote black advancement. Sooner or later, the labour movement must confront the schizoid class aspirations of its vanguard.

Referring to next year's general election, Cosatu's Western Cape secretary Tony Ehrenreich observed in early August: 'Elections are not only about voting every five years... Our comrades in power must not do as they please, they must do as we please.'

Ehrenreich's expectation would be normal were it not for the fact that Cosatu has long pledged support for the ANC without the ANC having agreed to do anything to please Cosatu. This is manifestly not the way to win back working class power. The alliance might yet come to serve working class interests, notwithstanding the very serious criticisms of the alliance made in the first part of the plan. But this outcome is virtually precluded if Cosatu

renews its marriage vows without any pre-nuptial agreement. This is continuation of the battered wife syndrome.

### Conclusion

The ambivalence of women who cannot leave their abusing partners evidently reflects the 2015 plan's own deeply embedded ambivalence towards the ANC. Saying this does not mean that Cosatu should start consulting a divorce lawyer. What it does mean is that Cosatu should have the self-confidence to require much more from its ANC partner.

As far as the plan is concerned, it would have meant Cosatu being able to carry through the logic of its own robust and assertive analysis. It is the plan's manifest inability to do so that leaves its readers at once stimulated and disappointed. Readers gripped by the analysis will be deeply dismayed by the dampness of the strategic prescriptions being offered. Those who by contrast found the strategy engaging will be disenchanted with the analysis. The task for those who applaud the analysis is to help complete the exercise – and to do so knowing full well that there are few easy answers. Knowing, moreover, that the easy answers are in any event only partial ones.

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*This is an edited version of an article written by Rudin who writes in his personal capacity. He is a Samwu official.*

