

Cosatu at the crossroads serving the core or the working poor?

Cosatu, launched in 1985, recently celebrated 20 years of its existence.

Eddie Webster reflects on the changing labour market and organisational choices facing the Federation then and now.

The roots of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) lie in the period of worker militancy in the early seventies. The trigger was the 1973 strikes in the Durban-Pinetown area. This upsurge of worker militancy took employers and the apartheid government by surprise. They blamed agitators and communists for this worker unrest.

But workers did not need agitators to tell them that their wages were low, working conditions were harsh and that they were discriminated against because of their colour. "I joined the union," one member of the early unions said when I interviewed him in 1975 in Umlazi, "because workers are not treated like human beings by management."

This comment gets to the heart of the historic tension between

competing forms of unionism. On the one hand, between 'pure and simple' trade unionism seeking to obtain the best deal for labour understood as a commodity, centred on trade unionism narrowly understood as a service organisation. Or on the other, a 'social unionism', involving a commitment to labour as part of a broader movement of working people struggling for social justice. Here workers' identities are blended with their status as members of a household, members of a community and a political entity.

There was little doubt among these early union activists that labour should be part of a broader movement of working people and that democracy had to be established in South Africa. But having the right to vote for representatives in parliament was not their central aim. What workers were struggling for went beyond parliamentary democracy. It was a struggle for a voice in their workplaces, in the economy and, indeed, in society.

That was then, what about now? What is the role of labour in the era of globalisation? Under the impact of work restructuring, the labour market has become increasingly fragmented. On the one hand, CEOs such as Jacko Maree of Standard Bank received a package of R38.9-million last year. On the other hand, we see the emergence of a labour market increasingly differentiated

into three zones - a core of relatively secure workers enjoying full-time work and benefits, a non-core of increasingly insecure part-time, contract and out-sourced workers, and a growing periphery of informal workers and the unemployed.

Indeed the very place where one works has changed. For many, it is no longer the factory, the mine or the office. It could be the street where goods and services are sold in a precarious environment. It could be at home, where dresses are made. It could be someone else's home where workers are paid to stitch shoes as part of a global commodity chain that runs from Mitchells Plain, to Wal-Mart in the United States. Or, more dramatically, it could be in cyberspace in a call centre on the Waterfront in Cape Town, where workers receive a call from a Lufthansa customer in Berlin via satellite linking which is then bounced back to their head office in Frankfurt. Or it could be one of Cosatu's 70 000 nurses 'moonlighting' in a private home because of the shocking conditions in our public hospitals.

Most disturbingly, the lack of decent work in the formal economy has placed the burden of poverty firmly onto the household. Social grants are crucial for the survival of these households but the lack of regular employment strains intra-household relationships to the limit. Indeed the household is no

longer a homogenous unit. It is often the site of violent conflict between men and women, mothers and daughters arguing whether to spend their R780 pension grant on food or beer, or the R180 child grant on schooling or braided hair.

Importantly, the composition of the workforce has changed. In a survey that I conducted on worker organisation in 1975, 92% of union members were semiskilled and unskilled. In a recent Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) survey, we found that 38% were semiskilled and unskilled, 42% skilled, 9% in supervisory and 8% in clerical positions. In the 1975 survey no member had been educated beyond Form 2 (Grade 10), 17% had no formal education and only 34% had post-primary education. In our most recent survey, 7% of Cosatu members had a university degree and 64% had matric or above, with only 1% with no formal education.

One out of ten Cosatu members is now a school teacher and a third are in the public sector. Cosatu members are now better educated and more skilled than the average worker. Not surprisingly the bulk of Cosatu members (79%) are drawn from a new generation of workers – post-1994. Furthermore, 92% of Cosatu members are in ‘the core’ of the labour market.

These changes in the nature of work and the composition of the workforce places Cosatu in a

dilemma. The shift of large numbers of workers into vulnerable non-core jobs has weakened its membership base. It has left large numbers of the working poor without a voice in their workplaces. The spontaneous protests we have seen recently over essential services in our townships and the new social movements that have emerged, are signs of a deeper social crisis for working people.

As it celebrates its 20th birthday, Cosatu faces a choice. Does it focus narrowly on the core, on ‘pure and simple’ unionism? Or does it broaden its base to become a voice for working people as a whole? Or is it possible to combine a renewed focus on workplace issues with a broadening of Cosatu’s constituency to include those in the non-core and the periphery?

The challenge facing labour in the seventies and eighties was to

build shop floor based industrial unions. Today’s challenge requires new organisational forms, new alliances and new strategies. This is not only a moral challenge. If workers in the core are to protect their hard-won gains from erosion by the non-core and periphery, labour standards and a social floor will need to be extended to all working people. Without an organisational voice, demagogues will emerge among the working poor who will destroy the heritage Cosatu has bequeathed to a democratic South Africa.

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Eddie Webster is a professor of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand. This is a speech given at the celebration of 20 years of Cosatu in Durban in early December 2005. It is based on surveys done among union members over the past thirty years.