

Deepening radical change

Taking skills seriously

Jonas Mosia and Bizzah Mantantana argue that a focus on skills development should not be seen as reformist but rather as a way of deepening radical political change. They suggest ways to take greater advantage of the Skills Development Act.

In 1998 the democratic government promulgated the Skills Development Act (SDA) four years after the 1994 democratic breakthrough. The SDA was one of the many interventions introduced to create a better life for the working class.

For many skills development 'activists/practitioners' within the trade union movement, the introduction of the SDA represented a decisive intervention in the labour market. In fact some dubbed this development as the "skills revolution".

But can we say we are seeing fundamental improvements in the conditions of workers and the working class broadly since the introduction of the SDA over a decade ago?

AIMS OF SDA

Firstly though what are the main aims of the SDA?

The SDA aims to develop the skills "required by the economy, society and learners in a manner which links with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)".

The SDA is supposed to change the workplace and turn it into an active learning environment and develop the skills of workers, to: "improve their prospects for a quality life, ensure workplace productivity and competitiveness, promote self-employment, and improve delivery of social services".

Importantly the SDA created the space for the recognition of skills that workers had acquired through many years of work experience - Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Because the SDA provides for the accreditation of learning on the NQF, it turns RPL into a powerful instrument to ensure nationally recognised learning credits and thus it establishes a framework for education and training that leads to qualifications for workers.

Cosatu played a critical role in this skills revolution, particularly the RPL provision. This was informed by our resolve to transform the workplace so that the majority of workers do not continue to work in low-paying and poor quality jobs. As the Cosatu general secretary noted, acquiring of skills "help workers to earn a living wage, have quality jobs and

participate in all aspects of society".

In 1997, Cosatu conducted research, through the Participatory Research Unit (PRU), to look into the RPL processes that had been put in place in various industries, with the aim of developing guidelines for the implementation of the RPL.

SKILLS AND THE NDR

The rigorous implementation of the SDA will go a long way to facilitating the objectives of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR).

The NDR is about "the liberation of blacks in general and Africans in particular from political and socio-economic bondage; it is about uplifting the quality of life of all South Africans, especially the poor, the majority of whom are African and female". This is according to the ANC Strategy and Tactics (S&T) document. The S&T further states that "The hierarchy of disadvantage suffered under apartheid will naturally inform the magnitude of impact of the programmes of change and the attention paid particularly to those who occupied the lowest rungs on the apartheid social ladder."

To attain this objective, one of the tools workers use is the skills development terrain (which is a plane of struggle) to achieve short-term gains with the aim of achieving the long-term goal of the working-class struggle - socialism. In the conduct of the struggle, there is a strategy according to the ANC S&T, "which is the ultimate goal, and tactics, which are the methods and actions that respond to changing immediate circumstances."

It is in this context that it is incorrect to label the struggle in the

skills arena as reformist. The false division between revolution and reform was addressed by Rosa Luxemburg more than a hundred years ago in her pamphlet 'Reform or Revolution'.

Luxemburg saw a relationship between reform and revolution: "The practical daily struggle for reforms, for the amelioration of the condition of the workers within the framework of the existing social order, and for democratic institutions, offers the Social Democracy the only means of engaging in the proletarian class struggle and working in the direction of the final goal, the conquest of political power and the suppression of wage labour. For Socialist Democracy, there is an indissoluble tie between social reforms and revolution. The struggle for reform is its means; the social revolution, its goal."

It is true that Luxemburg wrote many years ago and her views were informed by conditions in Germany then. So it is important to look closer to home.

The 10th Congress of the South African Communist Party (SACP) put the debate on reform and revolution to rest: "The struggle for socialism is a vast historical struggle to shift the balance of class forces towards working people and other popular forces. This struggle has not been and will never be a single, evolutionary development guaranteed by history. Taking place on the terrain of a world dominated by capitalism, it is marked by moments of stagnation, by advances, ruptures, by reverses, and, no doubt, by decisive moments. To understand the struggle as a single contest between revolution and reform is not helpful."

IS THERE PROGRESS?

The 2007/08 Employment Equity Commission (EEC) Report paints a worrying picture about transformation in the workplace. The report states that two decades into our democracy, race and gender dynamics are still issues in the

workplace. Unless we do things in a much more radical manner, transformation will remain on paper. According to the report, the economically active population comprised of 74.8% Africans, 10.3% coloureds, 2.8% Indians and 12.1% whites.

However, when it comes to influential positions in the workplace whites still take a lion's share while black representation is almost insignificant. As Figure 1 indicates, Africans constitute 18.8% of top managers, coloureds 3.9%, Indians 6.1%, whites 68.2% and foreign nationals 3.1%.

The picture does not change at the senior management level where Africans make up 18.1%, coloureds 6.1%, Indians 65.2% and whites 65.2%. The situation changes a bit when it comes to professionals and middle management with Africans occupying 24.1% of the positions, coloureds 8.5%, Indians 8.7% and whites 57.2%.

Coming to unskilled workers the situation is turned on its head. As Figure 2 below shows, Africans still constitute a whopping 80.9% of the unskilled workforce, coloureds 11.8%, Indians 1.3% and whites 1.1%.

Figure 1: Percentage of top management to race

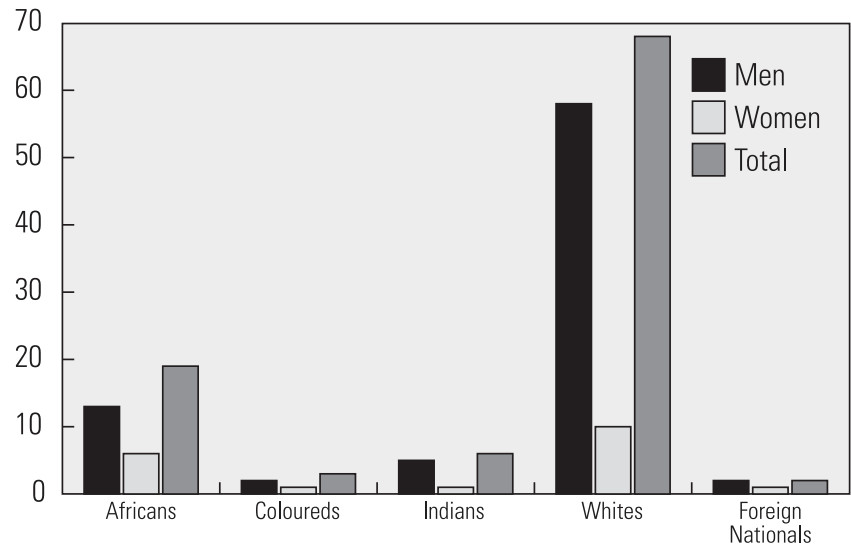
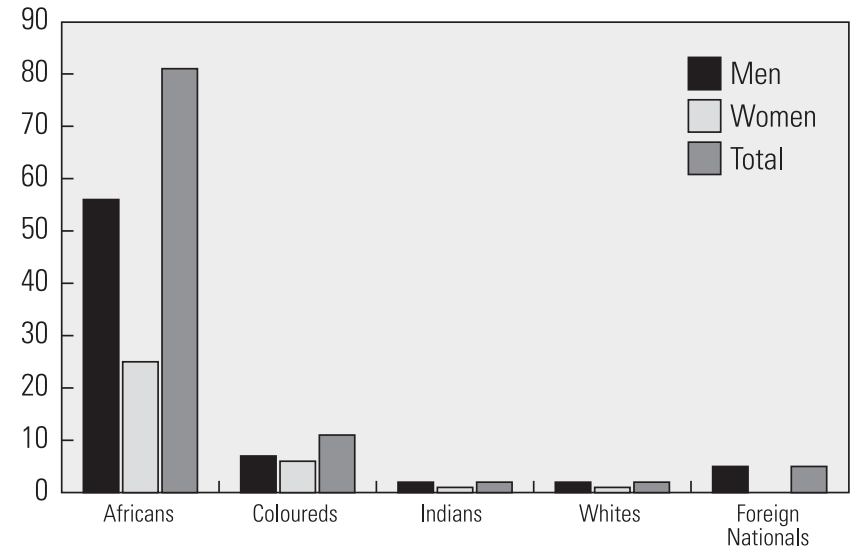


Figure 2: Unskilled workers by race



CHALLENGES

Cosatu played an important role in the development of the new skills regime but why do we still have so many unskilled workers? Is the skills development regime working? There are many factors that have contributed to its slow progress and some are subjective, others objective.

Workplaces

While we have deployed comrades to sit on many structures dealing with skills issues there is a major problem in terms of accountability. We do not have a clear picture of what these people do in those structures and there is also a problem of mandating.

The other challenge is the capacity of shop stewards to develop workplace skills plans. Affiliates have not spent time and effort on the skills revolution where it matters most, the workplace. We have been found wanting!

Below are some issues that the federation must engage with:

- Workplace Skills Planning: signing off of workplace skills plans by the authorised people remains an issue;
- Payment of levies by the state: a debate needs to be entered into in terms of the role of the state;
- Skills Development Committee: in certain instances these committees are not taken seriously. Disturbing though, is that in the latest version of the regulations, there is nothing on skills development committees;
- Skills Development Facilitator: here we have backtracked. We used to campaign for a jointly agreed appointment of the SDF Facilitator;
- Learnerships: uneven progress has been made. Tracking absorption into employment of these learners remains a major challenge;
- Abet (adult basic education and training): we have taken our feet off the accelerator in this area. The vigour with which we used to campaign for Abet has seriously slowed down;

- RPL: the debate on a coordinated approach to RPL, has been postponed. The federation needs to revive the discussions on its role in establishing an RPL centre in collaboration with some credible institutions of learning.

Employment Equity and Skills Development

In this area, there has been no clear articulation between the SDA & Employment Equity Act. In fact in instances where attempts are made to have Employment Equity Committees, these are convened outside the Workplace Skills Committees and the converse is true!

Setas and other structures

Much of our preoccupation has been with the Setas (Sector Education & Training Authorities). But even in Setas, we have seen a tendency towards governance-related matters, as opposed to engaging with the finer details of what the Setas are about. In some of the Setas we have encountered these challenges:

- Bureaucratic practices;
- The role of Setas: there is a need for analysis of sector-specific training needs;
- Duplication between Setas and Jipsa (Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition);
- Our representatives get bogged down in technocratic debates and governance issues which are important but they also urgently need to engage with what is core to their members;
- Poor management, both financial and governance, of Setas;
- The incapacity of Setas to spend their budgets which includes a lack of monitoring and compliance;
- Lack of access to Setas at provincial levels;
- The regularisation of service providers and who should monitor them;
- There is no clarity on what agenda we are serving with our representation, for example on the National Skills Authority.

WAY FORWARD

Within Cosatu we must develop a clear strategy to engage with the skills revolution. This means effective coordination across affiliates and effective deployment of worker leaders. Skills development and education within the federation needs serious discussion in order to integrate our work on skills into our education and training work within the federation.

We urgently need to develop the capacity of all our representatives and train our shop-stewards to properly engage on skills issues. It is essential to mainstream skills development in collective bargaining.

We also urgently need to conduct research on how we have fared in the skills revolution. We need to understand the extent to which workers have benefited since 1998, for example, how many have gone through training and been employed or promoted.

CONCLUSION

Maths and science historically used to 'sift' the majority from the mainstream education system and from relevant skills needed to move into better paying jobs in the labour market. Has this paradigm shifted? You be the judge!

If it is to be a revolution, we need to refocus on what to do in order to uplift the skills levels of the working class and poor.

Remember, there is a saying, "What is not won in the streets, cannot be won in the boardrooms." LB

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