

Who's the boss



The collapse of the Soviet Union, symbolised by the coming down of the Berlin Wall, threw the global left into a turmoil because it suddenly found itself, largely, without an alternative moral model to global capitalism. This has undoubtedly affected unions and how they have positioned themselves in post-apartheid SA. They continue to talk the rhetoric and culture of socialism and anti-capitalism (as does the SA Communist Party and others). But what happens in practice? Are their practices in line with their historical positions of socialism or is it inevitable that socialists and anti-capitalists have to deal with capitalism in this globalised world?

Today it is not uncommon to find that the most rabid socialists (and unions with strong socialist roots) are involved in various types of 'capitalist' activities either through union investment companies and/or black economic empowerment (BEE) deals. Do these activities represent the final nail (not NAIL the empowerment group headed by former trade unionists) in the coffin of socialism? Do these moves reflect an attempt to work within the rules of capitalism to benefit workers? Or are we witnessing a process whereby the labour movement is becoming more politically sober and pragmatic in finding solutions to poverty, unemployment, inequality and marginalisation.

It is clear that there is a disjuncture between the rhetoric of the old-style left and practice. Whether the answer lies somewhere between reflecting 'progressive' innovative thinking and an ideological retreat dressed up in rhetorical radical language it amounts to an accommodation of capitalism not dissimilar to social democratic parties and unions in Europe.

Whatever, the reason it must be rather difficult for organisations such as Cosatu and the Party to continue restating their commitment to socialism in the context of all these initiatives. Hence, it is critical that a

more politically honest debate takes place so that workers can truly benefit from some of these developments as highlighted in this edition. For example, the lessons learnt from the KVV BEE deal and the role of employee share ownership schemes (aside from co-operatives). Does this amount to crossing the line? Or is this characterisation outdated and requires an ideological rethink. The question of employee share ownership schemes will be debated further in the next edition of the *Labour Bulletin*.

Whether it is Esops or union investment companies, the issue is the same. It is about how organised labour can actively participate in the restructuring of the economy so as to benefit workers (and hopefully the poor in some way) not just what Cosatu's Western Cape regional secretary Tony Ehrenreich calls the 'usual empowerment suspects'. Active participation in economic restructuring is not only about changes in ownership, control and deals but about how unions can effect change in the workplace through the empowerment of workers. Hence the need to focus on skills and employment equity. Are union officials

taking these issues seriously? Are they participating effectively in structures such as Setas which they co-manage and for which they are co-accountable and likewise as trustees on pension and provident funds or are they using these positions to their own advantage which could place them in compromising positions as members questions decisions which impact on their future. The Setas, as an important labour market institution, have continued to receive negative publicity because of allegations of mismanagement, corruption and lack of delivery. Are union representatives talking out about corruption or governance issues in the Setas so that they can operate more effectively for the benefit of workers or are they themselves party to some of these activities? The issue of governance, accountability and corruption forms the focus of a special report in this edition. It is hoped that this special report will stimulate discussion and action so as to contribute towards dealing with some of the problems plaguing unions in its current phase of development.

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Editor

