

Fighting crime

building community in the Western Cape

On a Friday in the middle of last year COSATU's campaign against crime in the Western Cape began. Three hundred shopstewards and union officials in bright orange bibs boarded trains and patrolled stations in greater Cape Town. The shopstewards moved up and down the trains and the stations, keeping a sharp eye out for pickpockets and other criminals. They took time to discuss the problems of crime with the commuters.

The campaign had three aims:

- to build people's confidence to begin to organise against crime;
- to put pressure on Metrorail and the police to ensure the safety of commuters on trains and stations;
- to build the 'civic face' of COSATU as an organisation concerned with community problems.

A joint committee, consisting of shopstewards, union officials, Metrorail officials and representatives of the police, was established to oversee the campaign. Shopstewards received training beforehand, and once a month, on a Friday, they were deployed to six train lines that had been identified as suffering particularly severe crime problems.

The shopstewards took advantage of the tradition of preaching in the trains to address passengers in railway carriages, and to open discussion with groups of commuters on trains and stations. Their message was that people need to look out

Karl von Holdt looks at a COSATU campaign against crime on trains and stations.

for each other in the face of crime, and that by assisting each other and organising together they could make a difference.

Commuters were at first surprised to see the shopstewards, but then welcomed the opportunity to talk about the problem of crime and complain about Metrorail security and the police. They promised to participate in the initiative.

COSATU had insisted that at least two police officers be present on each station and that Metrorail provide security personnel in the trains. They were to arrest any of the criminals identified by shopstewards or other passengers, and to protect the shopstewards - many of whom were women - if necessary. The police reported that train crime on the targeted days was reduced by 70%.

According to COSATU regional secretary Tony Ehrenreich, the challenge for the new year is to translate the mobilisation achieved last year into organisation. COSATU hopes that its shopstewards, with their organisational experience, can assist commuters to form train committees and station committees. Commuters use the same trains and often the same carriages everyday, and this

should facilitate organisation. A problem last year was the high turnover among shopstewards participating in the campaign, because of the difficulty of getting paid time off from work. This meant that each month the process of trying to establish organisational contact and networks among commuters had to start afresh

'I know there is danger surrounding us in this campaign, but there is no alternative to protecting ourselves, our children and our communities. It is our duty to the innocent victims and to the next generation.' - Mario Wanza, NUM official from The Shopsteward

Another challenge will be to keep the pressure on both police and Metrorail to provide sufficient security capacity at stations and on trains every day, as a backup to the permanent organisation of commuters

The campaign by COSATU in the Western Cape against crime is not confined to the trains, but extends to the broader community. On the one hand, the federation is urging its members to become involved in community initiatives such as community policing forums and neighbourhood watches. On the other hand, it is applying pressure to the NNP-controlled government and the provincial police to redirect their policing resources to black communities where crime is rife

Tackling crime at this level is a complex and hazardous business in the Western

Cape. The political terrain is complex, with both the NNP provincial government (which many workers in the province voted for) and the ANC national government (with which COSATU is in an alliance) having some responsibility for policing. Then there are the gangs and Pagad, both of which are deeply embedded in the social fabric of black communities, and which have a frightening capacity for violence.

In October last year, a union official who is very active in COSATU's anti-crime initiatives, the NUM's Mario Wanza, was at home when masked men broke in, threatened him with violence if COSATU continued to interfere in issues of crime and crime prevention, and left with his car and other possessions. It is not clear whether this threat came from gangs, Pagad (which has formally denied involvement), or a third force intent on fuelling tension between COSATU and such organisations

Need for caution

Ehrenreich argues that it is necessary for COSATU to be extremely cautious about how it positions itself in the intense and violent conflict between various forces in the community, and between them and the police. Workers and community members are vulnerable, and COSATU 'cannot afford to place its shopstewards and members in a war situation with gangs or others'. Such a situation could also 'advance a possible third force agenda'. Gangsterism is tangled up with a host of social problems, and should be tackled on a broad front, he feels. Nonetheless, COSATU 'will continue to speak out against crime and violence'.

After the attack on Wanza, the federation put forward a set of demands for better security and improved policing in the Cape. Together with its police

affiliate, POPCRU, COSATU has developed a vision for improving co-ordination of policing and re-deploying resources to black residential areas. They argue that the chief problem in the police is poor management at a senior level. POPCRU appears to be relatively strong in the region, despite having only 5 000 members there, and according to Ehrenreich there was a good response to the union's call for police to work voluntary overtime during the holiday season

The COSATU region threatened to resort to the dispute procedures in the LRA, and possible mass action, if negotiations with the provincial government over its policing demands proved fruitless. The provincial government responded by attempting to lay responsibility for poor policing performance at the door of national government.

In the event, the confrontation at provincial level was overtaken by intervention from national government in the form of Operation Good Hope. This is an initiative to boost policing capacity and co-ordination in the province in order to tackle the 'urban terrorism' of elements associated with Pagad, and the problem of gang violence. This initiative effectively addressed most of COSATU's demands

However, Ehrenreich worries that the initiative will focus on the high-profile crime and violence associated with the gangs and Pagad, and neglect 'ordinary crimes' that affect workers and community residents everyday, such as robbery and rape. COSATU's main thrust now will be to insist, both in its engagement with government and police, and within the Tripartite Alliance, that this does not happen

The COSATU anti-crime campaign has combined constructive initiatives to build



pic Rachel Visser

Shopstewards were deployed on lines that suffered crime problems.

institutions and support reform of government, with the traditional stance of mobilising against government around a set of popular demands. In Ehrenreich's view this has been made easier by the political situation in the province, where COSATU and the ANC are in opposition to the NNP government. This enables COSATU to draw on the repertoire of protest action it developed during the 1980s. COSATU has been successful in mobilising a campaign that portrays the NNP government as perpetuating white privilege through the unequal allocation of policing resources. Because the campaign addresses issues of burning importance to most of its members, it has popular legitimacy and those members who are strong supporters of the NNP are unable to denounce it.

The COSATU Western Cape region plans to continue this approach in its election campaign. In a region where many coloured workers voted for the NNP, the focus of the campaign will be on workers' right to make an informed choice about which party to support, rather than simply trying to mobilise support for the ANC. Ehrenreich believes that the record of the ANC speaks for itself when compared to the NNP - improved child maintenance laws, improved labour legislation, and so on.

'Informed choice'

In the first democratic elections in 1991, COSATU made a tremendous contribution to the Alliance campaign, providing both organisational capacity and resources, and unionists campaigned both in the community and the workplace. In this year's elections, COSATU will not be able to make as great a contribution as it did in the liberation elections. In the Cape, its focus will be on campaigning for an informed choice in the workplace among

members, and in industrial areas among workers more broadly. In the community, the ANC branches are to take the lead and COSATU members will slot into their programmes. The affiliates are preparing databases of all members' places of residence, so that ANC activists can make contact with them in the community.

The Western Cape region of COSATU is proving to be dynamic and innovative in dealing with a complex social and political terrain. Its success, both in mobilising its members, and in influencing developments in the province, has come from building the 'civic face' of the union movement. Wanza articulated this vision after the attack on himself: 'I know there is danger surrounding us in this campaign,' he said, 'but there is no alternative to protecting ourselves, our children and our communities. It is our duty to the innocent victims and to the next generation.'

Despite the difficulties of the last few years, COSATU is making an important contribution to strengthening institutions and the fabric of community solidarity, and thus to rebuilding our society. However, organisations in civil society cannot fight crime alone. Ordinary citizens, workers and residents are vulnerable in the face of organised criminals. If, for example, there is not an effective, well-resourced police station in their community, there is little that residents can achieve. Government must deliver. ★

*This article is based on an interview with Tom Ehrenreich and information contained in an article for COSATU's *The Shopsteward* magazine by SACTWU media officer Rachel Visser, to whom I would like to thank for making a draft of her article available to me. The quote from Mario Wanza is taken from her article. Karl von Holdt is a research fellow at SWOP and Bulletin board member.*