

Has the battle for Polokwane been won?

Polokwane has come and gone and a new ANC leadership – endorsed by Cosatu – has been elected. What are the implications for Cosatu in meeting its objectives set out in its 2015 plan? In an attempt to stimulate debate on Cosatu's future challenges in the build-up to the 2009 elections and beyond, **Renee Grawitzky** interviewed a number of trade unionists and academics to get their views.

Compared to the eighties, when the task was simply to unite black workers, the struggle for the unity of the working class has become far more complex in the 1990s. Political divisions within the black working class are becoming more significant as the struggle for liberation is replaced by electoral politics. This will make Cosatu's political role more complex and difficult than it has been in the past... These turbulent times offer the progressive labour movement new challenges and impose new responsibilities. (SALB vol 17 no 5 September/October 1993)

What then are some of the challenges facing the labour movement and in particular Cosatu in the aftermath of Polokwane and the period leading up to the fourth democratic elections next year?

POLITICAL CHALLENGES

Election pact

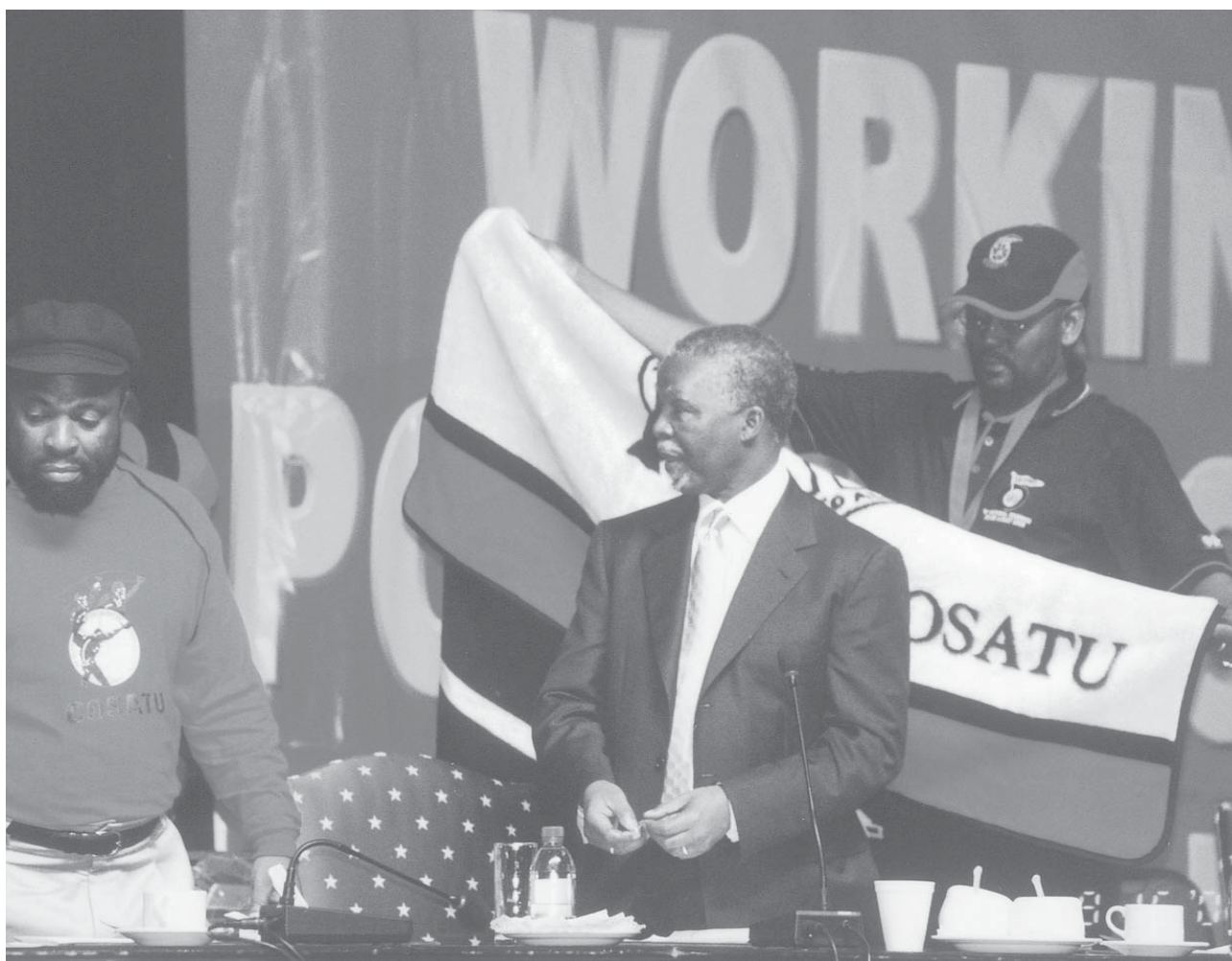
One of the things that has defined Cosatu as a progressive trade union movement has been its involvement beyond the workplace to socio-economic and national political

issues. 'In this context, it is prudent to continue in the terrain of fighting for the heart and soul of the ANC and not to give it on a platter to the emerging bourgeoisie. So this reasoning saw an increased involvement in ANC politics. Post Polokwane, the issue is now that Cosatu has a better platform to engage at an alliance level and has a better chance to arrive at an agreement around an election pact. A pact will assist us to leverage for a working class agenda. The problem is that Cosatu has not sufficiently articulated a left project. It is difficult for Cosatu to do so as it needs to find the time and space to talk about its vision. Its broad vision is socialism but we are not clear what this means in practice. Cosatu needs to be clear about what it wants government to be accountable to' (union leader). A number of trade unionists argue that it is not the first time Cosatu has pushed for an election pact. In 1994, Cosatu conceived the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which formed the basis of the ANC's election manifesto. Pursuing an election pact raises some critical challenges for Cosatu, they argue. Firstly, the

federation has not mobilised members around a set of demands. 'Cosatu must now begin to find a solution to both mass mobilisation and what it actually wants in terms of engagement with government.' Secondly, how will it hold a new government and the ANC leadership accountable, especially a leadership it endorsed and promoted? How will Cosatu pursue a pact with an ANC leadership that it supported? Unionists argue that whilst the concept of an election pact is not necessarily a bad thing, a lot however, depends on the strength of the organisation and to what extent 'we have built a movement which has strong shopfloor structures and a strong base on the ground... the strength of any pact is dependent on the strength of the organisations party to the pact. Even if the current leadership remain in Cosatu, I am not sure they could enforce the pact because I do not think the organisation is as strong as we would like it to be. As a grassroots organisation there is a lot of work to be done' (union official).

The Zuma coalition

Some unionist argue that Cosatu has



played its last card because it can no longer say that the problem within the ANC is bad leadership as it actively endorsed and supported the election of the new leadership. 'Ideologically Cosatu has tied itself to a new leadership and will compromise itself because this leadership is now viewed as a reflection of the left' (union official). Does the new leadership mean the ANC is transformed and that the 1996 class project has been defeated at a leadership level? Has Cosatu reclaimed the ANC for workers and the poor? The battle for Polokwane was to reclaim the ANC by the working class and the poor – has that happened? One unionist says Cosatu needs to now explain the meaning of Polokwane for the working class. He adds the composition of the new ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) 'does not suggest all is going to be rosy going forward.' The coalition around Zuma, he says, is not a solid coalition as it was really

about a challenge to a personality rather than policy or principle. 'There is a disproportionate focus on relying on individuals who might be pro workers and not relying on the organisation of workers to push an agenda or for that matter ensuring implementation of Cosatu resolution. The best way of putting pressure on the ANC is by mobilising workers around a core set of demands and this would mean building organisation.'

Another unionist says Cosatu was not serious about a left project but about settling scores and 'now together with the SA Communist Party has tried to capture the ANC which is ideologically weak... The new ANC leadership reflect the same class formations as before.' The approach ahead of Polokwane, a trade unionist says, was to position President Thabo Mbeki as the person responsible for neo-liberalism (and the adoption of Gear which occurred during former President Nelson Mandela's rule), a

lack of service delivery and a shift from ANC policy. 'So Polokwane was about getting rid of the symbol of neo-liberalism and put in place leaders who have more respect for the alliance and that will allow us to influence policies. It is a real victory that Mbeki was removed by the branches in a way that the ANC has never experienced' (union official).

But how can you then say this is a left victory, if the new leadership says nothing is going to change? The failure to mobilise rank and file on a clear left ticket, a unionist argues, has resulted in inappropriate and unacceptable alliances being formed. Where does this leave the labour movement? 'Cosatu and the SACP felt disconnected by Mbeki's style and they were now getting space to influence the NDR. They believe that by obtaining space in the alliance, they can influence policy. How will this happen if the fundamentals remain in place? What could emerge is that there



will be more alliance meetings and good relations will prevail within the alliance with little real change while labour is forced into compromising deals in the interests of building the democratic state' (union official).

Balance between politics and building organisation

The September Commission (released August 1997) constituted Cosatu's first attempt to redefine its role post 1994 and sought to reaffirm the notion of social movement unionism. In the aftermath of the 1999 elections, there was a growing acknowledgement that, for a variety of reasons, the Commission recommendations were not sufficiently embraced and implemented. A union official claims that the lack of follow through is partly a result of the fact that Cosatu began to face intense hostility from the ANC. As a result, Cosatu's focus shifted to the ANC and its relationship within the

alliance. 'Now politics has assumed a dynamic all of its own. The federation could self destruct over its overemphasis on politics.'

ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES

Building a strong organisation

A former trade unionist argues that an 'alarming sign of the losses of institutional memory within the labour movement is the things that are believed to account for the strength and sophistication of Cosatu'. The new generation of trade unionists, he argues, 'who are attracted to the public image of Cosatu have no sense of the triggers of the strength they found in Cosatu. They assume its strength is derived from its public policy engagement and political role. Therefore, the focus should be on enhancing political and ideological consciousness and how we influence and impact on the developmental framework of the new government.' The unions that emerged out of the 1973 strikes

(which formed the foundation for the establishment of Cosatu in 1985) were founded on strong shopfloor unionism - a movement strongly linked to worker power. The focus was on entrenching the movement on the shopfloor. 'The anti-apartheid role it played benefitted first from the strength it gained from its shopfloor power - it was a movement which built its strength in the workplace which could then achieve victories in the public domain. The old approach was based on building power on the shopfloor, industry level and then at a national level... Unions have abandoned the shopfloor as their primary place of engagement and gaining power. No renewal will be achieved without an operational return to the shopfloor'. Whilst it is necessary for Cosatu to engage at a broader political level, there should be an equal focus on building the organisation. Another unionist acknowledged that 'not enough has been done. We need to engage at a political level but the biggest



challenge is maintaining a strong and democratic labour movement. Otherwise the labour movement will become about a trade union elite pursuing its own interests.'

Developing new leaders/internal capacity

Some unionists argue that it is inevitable that there is a 'dynamic process of people leaving' the labour movement as reflected in what transpired in 1994, 1999 and 2004. A similar process of 'redeployment' is likely to occur after the 2009 elections. It should be acknowledged however, that the exodus of unionists at all levels (including shop stewards moving over to management or elsewhere) over the last ten years has been unprecedented. The reality is that the future of the labour movement relies on leadership who still believe in building strong independent worker power and independent working class politics. Therefore, leadership who see their futures elsewhere should move on to provide the opportunity for new blood to come into the labour movement or old blood that would like to come back. The current Cosatu leadership should, however, be actively developing and cultivating a second and third layer of potential leaders, a Cosatu official says.

A former trade unionist recalls how difficult it was for the new Cosatu leadership post 1994 to challenge Mandela. How will new leadership be able to stand up against an ANC leadership Cosatu has actively supported, he asks.

Cosatu needs to focus on succession planning as well as developing its internal policy capacity so as to retain its independence and be in a position to produce policy alternatives.

Organisational renewal

Linked to questions around internal union capacity is the programme of organisational renewal which must be given more priority and take centre stage, a union leader argues. This process should also focus on ensuring a return of certain traditions and practices such as putting in place proper mandating processes and feedback to members. 'Outside of strikes, members are not being kept up to date on issues,' a union leader says. A former trade unionist says that building organisation is also about ensuring unions have the capacity to police legislation (which labour fought for) which can transform old apartheid workplaces. Currently, he says, the Department of Labour is attempting to do the work of unions because they do not have the capacity.

Culture of entitlement and individualism

One of the biggest challenges unions face, one official says, is the culture of individualism, self-enrichment and a sense of using the labour movement for material gains. This will affect the ability of unions to mobilise members and retain a militant base.

Violence

It is inevitable that violence can be a

consequence of industrial action but it could also be seen as a symptom of weaknesses within the labour movement, a former unionist claims. 'If unions are unsure of their position and are not succeeding in persuading workers to join them, then resorting to violence becomes a reality. Under these circumstances going out on strike is no longer viewed as a sign of strength but desperation.'

Atypical workers, new members and education

Whilst unions are still not having much success in recruiting atypical workers, there are some examples of where it is happening (see pages 12 and 42). Where unions are recruiting new members who have no history of unionisation, how many are recipients of union education? Which unions are still doing education? The issue of union education was discussed in the December edition of the *Numsa Bulletin*. A worker stated in a letter: 'Numsa must educate its shop stewards like before... We need to revive all the structures of our union. I've realised that we might die a slow death if we're not careful. We need this valuable training to survive the ongoing exploitation of the working class... The reality now is that our union structures are dying day by day and we don't want to admit that there's a problem in the movement. We keep on electing new structures, new shop stewards but no training takes place.'

Renee Grawitzky is a freelance journalist.