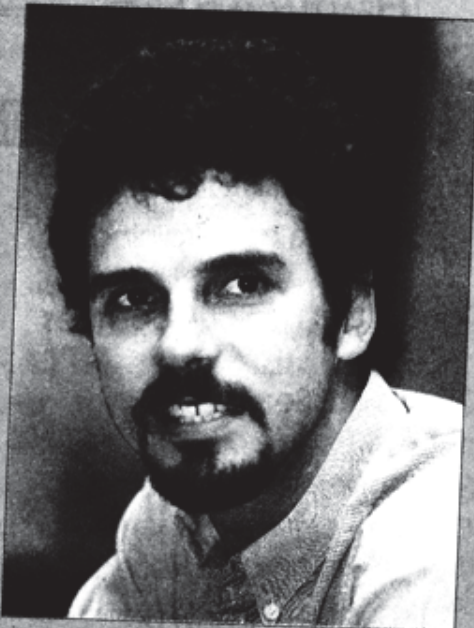




Sam Shilowa



Neil Coleman

Facing the future: *COSATU* defines its role



The national office bearers of the federation – president John Gomomo, general secretary Sam Shilowa, assistant general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi and information officer Neil Coleman – discussed their assessment of recent strikes,

their relations with the ANC in government and the federation's back to basics campaign with SAKHELA BUHLUNGU and KARL VON HOLDT.

Lessons of the recent strike wave

Since the April elections South Africa has been hit by waves of worker mass action and strikes. Most of the strikes were triggered off by wage disputes, but in most cases included other issues. The militancy for which COSATU members are well known has in the past not only been used to fight for shopfloor changes, it has also been channelled to address broader economic and political issues. Recent examples are the VAT stay-away, the rolling mass action and the mass protests in the wake of Chris Hani's assassination. So, what is the significance and lessons of the recent strikes and protests?

According to Zwelinzima Vavi the strikes were important for the labour movement after elections: "It was an untested terrain for both us as the labour movement and the bosses. I think the bosses took the view that says 'we fight here and die here, we give in here and everybody else will have to give in'. For them affordability (of wage demands) was not the issue. They were showing workers they will not get everything they want simply because the ANC is now in government."

Vavi says the strikes, particularly the Pick 'n Pay strike, occurred against the background of a concerted media onslaught against COSATU. The federation was branded as the people who wanted to sabotage the RDP. This hostility, together with the heavy-handed actions of the police, put the shopfloor leadership under immense pressure to settle far below their original bottom line.



John Gomomo



Zwelinzima Vavi

❖ All pics in this section by: Cedric Nunn

At the same time, says Sam Shilowa, the strikes suffered from a lack of solidarity support – an important lesson for the future. He argues that unions cannot start calling for solidarity support when the strike is already on: “We’ve got to find a way of planning well in advance, particularly when we know we are going into a strike. There is an answer from our recent national congress that we must strengthen not only our locals and regions, but we must set up organisers’ forums which look at issues of collective bargaining.” These forums could co-ordinate struggles and solidarity, and would include representatives from the federation itself and its affiliates. They would also deal with issues like building capacity, building organisation and implementing the RDP.

Shilowa believes the strikes have helped COSATU confront important issues, like changes to bring about economic empowerment through, for example, challenging employers to reduce the wage gap and to introduce training programmes. The strikes also allowed COSATU to deal with the question of productivity: “We began to emerge with a view that productivity is not just switching on workers and the machine. If you have a low skills base you can’t expect to have high productivity.”

Are unions not facing problems trying to channel worker militancy from wage struggles into struggles to restructure and democratise the workplace?

Neil Coleman argues that wage struggles and democratisation are not mutually exclusive: “Democratisation also becomes the vehicle through which you tackle issues like closing the wage gap, the wage structure, affirmative action, training, etc. In the Pick ’n Pay example you had an initial focus on wages and at the end the key gains that they made were not around wages. It was around a programme of affirmative action, reorganisation and democratisation of the workplace and decision-making.”

“Each industry will differ on what the issues are,” says Shilowa. “The real problem was that the employers, both in the Pick ’n Pay and auto industry strikes, made

themselves the vanguard of the bourgeoisie. They said ‘we will lead the wages’ struggle on behalf of everybody else’. It was important for labour to focus on it as well, precisely because the argument was that workers’ wages in this country are too high. I’m not saying the focus must always be on wages. We should not focus on democratisation only during wage struggles. You should have a continuous contestation of ideas on the shopfloor.”

A strike of a different kind was the blockade by truck drivers early in August. While most drivers are members of TGWU the action was planned and carried out by an organisation called the Turning Wheel Workers International Movement. Vavi says one of the lessons of the blockade is never to “stay away from your base one day”.

“If you are not there somebody else occupies the space. TGWU, like everybody else, will learn the hard way that the most important thing is service. Service is not about how good your reputation is. Service is something that is material to members.”

John Gomomo says the truckers’ blockade highlighted the need to educate shopstewards so they can give direction to union members at all times. Such training should deal with basic shopsteward duties on the shopfloor, as well as issues regarding the current situation in the country.

Tightening belts

The strikes have brought to the fore the debate about the sacrifices needed to be made to ensure the success of the RDP. Some people argue that unions need to reduce strikes and accept lower increases so that savings by employers could be used to improve competitiveness and create more jobs. This would also lead to the creation of an atmosphere, it is argued, that would attract foreign investment. President Mandela’s call to delegates at the COSATU congress for unions and their members to ‘tighten their belts’ added weight to these arguments.

Shilowa says COSATU does not feel threatened by what Mandela has raised:



“What he has done is to bring the thing into focus. Even the die-hard employers accept that there won’t be a wage freeze. We see it as follows: the wage structure for politicians, top bureaucrats and senior management is outrageous. People are living beyond the means of the country. You need to cut and freeze that side and also put in place a programme that brings up those who are at the lower rungs. We go further. In the public sector you regrade the jobs because the present grading keeps blacks at the bottom of the ladder. You work out a new career path for people to follow. And you do that in the private sector too.

“On the other hand, you can’t attract international investors unless local investors are investing (in South Africa). We must talk about beneficiation. Why should we spin and weave the wool outside of the country instead of here? The challenge to COSATU is not to recoil from this debate but to redefine it.”

Shilowa rejects the argument that one has to pay low wages in order to create jobs: “For all these years wages have been low. And how many jobs have been created?” I think that is what Mandela should ask them.

“The only way to create jobs is to expand the market... and look at training. You need to train those who are there, but also you need to train people who are unemployed. What the RDP envisages is a massive public works programme which has a training component in it. It means that as you restructure industry you bring on board other people.”

Vavi adds that while employers want to give workers wage increases in the region of 6 to 7%, research has revealed that employers have been “walloping themselves with 18 to 20-something percent increases in the past year.”

COSATU rejects therefore the notion that worker demands for increases are the main cause of rocketing labour costs. Shilowa pursues the point: “Of the wage bill they say we are consuming, between 49 and 52% goes into the pockets of senior management. Also, there are too many levels of management. All of those things must be tackled head-on. We will have to win the public debate on the shopfloor, not in the boardroom.”

“Let alone the wages that these managers get,” adds Gomomo, “look at other things

that they get – free petrol allowances, free cars (also for their spouses), allowances for their houses.”

Coleman continues: “It seems comrade Mandela is not being given balanced information by his advisors. Look at his example of the ‘Asian tigers’ where he was told that they are getting lower wages than we are in South Africa. In dollar terms workers in South Korea and Taiwan get three to four times what our workers are getting. Mandela wasn’t told that the management structures are much flatter in those countries, and that the ratio (of management to workers) is much narrower there than it is in this country. The level of investment in human resource development is also very high. The research and development of technology has given those countries their competitive edge.

“Balanced information needs to be put across not only to the president, but to the public as a whole so that we have an informed debate about what the economic options are.”

Relations with the government

For the first time in our history South Africa has a labour-friendly government. Many commentators have discussed the opportunities (in terms of influencing and shaping policies) and the dangers (regarding the independence of labour) presented by the

close ties between COSATU and the ANC, the majority party in the government. The federation’s national congress resolved to continue the alliance, while ensuring that COSATU retains its independence. According to the national leadership, COSATU will not be dictated to by the government.

Shilowa says media explanations of this relationship are simplistic and misleading: “Part of the interpretation given to the speeches by government ministers at our congress has been that there is a carrot and stick approach by the government. On the contrary we believe there is no coherent policy at this stage. The government is saying different things at different times. Some handle it better because they have chosen to involve the trade unions as they go along.

“I find it very difficult not to say some good things about Tito Mboweni, Minister of Labour. I think it is because he is not afraid to come to Vavi and say ‘hey, broer, there is this thing coming up, how do you think I should handle it’. It does not mean that he takes everything that Vavi says, but he knows that at least this is the thinking in the unions. There are areas where we think he could have formulated things better, but in the main his approach is that COSATU and the ANC are in alliance. There are things which we have all agreed way back

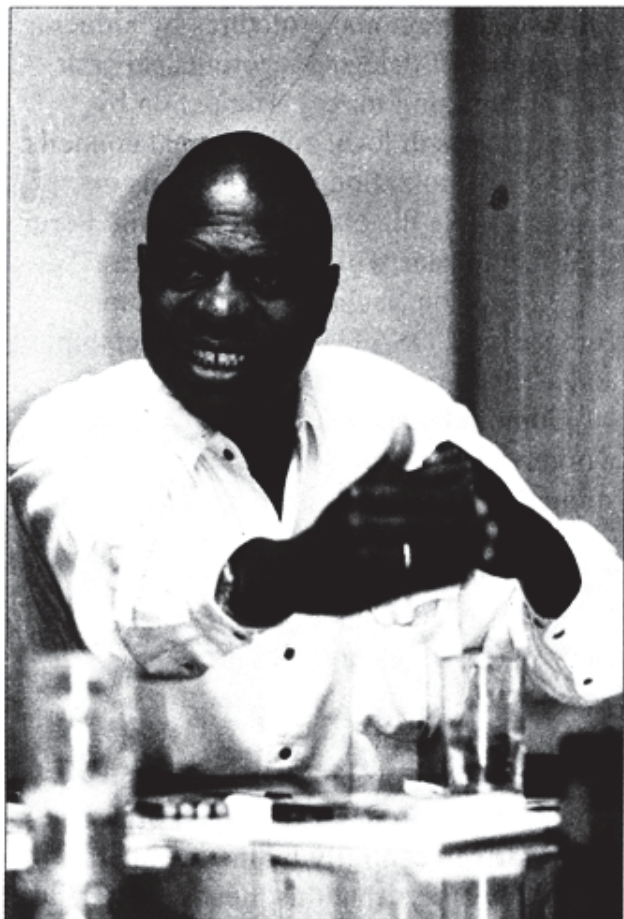
which we must win for workers. He sees it as his duty together with COSATU and the ANC to win these things for workers.

“The relationship with the government is going to be at three levels. The first level is based on the fact that the government of national unity (GNU) is a coalition government. Our

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role is to strengthen the hand of the ANC in the GNU. But that is not a blank cheque. We will support the GNU, and the ANC in particular, if the position and policies they advocate enhance our struggle.

“The second area is one of engagement in debate and negotiations. Take the recent

strike actions – before we had a high-powered delegation meeting the ANC there was no coherence. After we met them, if you listen to the debates in parliament, it was like we wrote their speeches. There has been that element of debate.

“The third area will have to be based on struggles. Struggles that say, ‘on this issue we are not going to budge. The ANC-led government will have to change on that issue.’”

The relationship with government is closely linked to what COSATU sees as its political role in the transition period. Says Vavi: “The first role is the consolidation of democracy, the power we have won at the political level. This means that we don’t unwittingly get taken up by slogans and end up supporting agendas of right wingers like the Public Service Association (PSA) and the Public Service League (PSL).

“The second role, of course, is the implementation of the RDP. We want to ensure that everything we do, including engagement with the government in standing committees of parliament, actually helps to... implement the RDP.”

“Thirdly, we want to play a watchdog role. We want to be able to criticise anybody whom we think is moving out of step or who is moving away from the policies of the alliance, and the RDP in particular. We

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didn't hesitate to condemn Joe Modise when he attempted to gag the *Weekly Mail*. We took on comrade Madiba when he attacked us publicly on the issue of strikes and international investors. Of course this watchdog role does not mean you just shout at whoever appears to be making a mistake. It also means that in a case where a minister has taken a correct decision, like justice minister Dullah Omar, we should be able to stand up and say 'we support that position'."

COSATU stresses that its only reason for publicly confronting allies is to set the record straight. Shilowa explains: "It's not like we want to create a name for ourselves. But the press will be the first to condemn us if we are seen to be accepting everything coming from the ANC. We are going to look at what best enhances the position of COSATU, and if it means differing with whoever, we will do so."

But COSATU will remain supportive of the ANC in dealing with the right wing, says Coleman. "We have to maintain that balance between the watchdog role – the critical role – and engaging sufficiently so that we are helping to drive the programme of those democratic elements within government. We are criticising the government for not doing enough to restructure the bureaucracy. But at the same time we strengthen their hand in relation to the PSA and the right wing. So it's a double-edged role."

"Still," says Shilowa, "we don't want to allow ourselves to become paratroopers of ministers. They must not think that they can do things incorrectly and later come to us and say: 'Hey chaps, we are really going to be under attack. Can you people now mount a campaign in our rescue.' We don't want to do that."

Organisational renewal

Recently, there has been much debate about a 'brain drain' and organisational weaknesses in COSATU. What is the federation doing about this? According to Vavi there is a need to restructure COSATU in order to meet changing needs. This restructuring will involve the streamlining of

national and regional structures by reducing the number of delegate meetings per year and encouraging mass participation by shopstewards in local and regional councils. With regard to national negotiations in structures like the National Economic Forum (NEF) emphasis will shift away from dependence on 'technocrats' to forums comprising COSATU national leadership and affiliate representatives.

Gomomo adds that the involvement of workers on the ground must remain the real strength of COSATU, which is why COSATU has decided on a campaign to go "back to basics".

Vavi says the main issue is whether COSATU will become a "narrow, boardroom-oriented federation led by the leadership and isolate itself from the real concerns and aspirations of the members" or whether it will remain "an organ of people's power driven centrally by the members".

Shilowa says that this means affiliate unions should come to the CEC with mandates from their membership: "We want to ensure that the sort of positions that they put across to the CEC are mass-driven. The leadership of COSATU must be seen as the entire CEC, the entire REC, the entire local shopstewards council. In other words we must build a situation where we are able to carry the bulk of the shopstewards on policy."

"We want to build a strong organisation that is capable of confronting the new challenges that are being thrown up by the democratisation process. We must find a way of dealing with the new technical approach that employers are putting to us. How do we deal with the globalisation of the economy? How do we deal with the fact that the GNU will not always take views which are sympathetic to us?"

Gomomo stressed that going back to basics does not mean leaving new issues like restructuring on the shopfloor. If we ignore such issues they are going to break us into pieces."

Shilowa continues: "Going back to basics does not mean going back to the same issues



that we were talking about in 1980 or 1985. The key to COSATU's success in the past was its capacity for mass mobilisation. Back to basics does not mean abandoning the issues confronting us, it means as we deal with these issues we must carry our base with us." Take the issue of an incomes policy. Before we go the route of an incomes policy we must unpack it. What do we mean by an incomes policy, what are the ingredients of it, what is good about it. Let's have an open debate with workers.

"Back to basics means that the federation must ensure it remains rooted in its constituency and that policies at national level are informed by debates among the rank and file. In short, back to basics means back to the base by means of mandates, report-backs and mass mobilisation."

But how is COSATU going to achieve its objectives when it continues to lose experienced leadership, including shopstewards who get promoted in their workplaces?

Gomomo says the unions can't block the promotion of shopstewards into management positions: "We should define what we expect from those people who are taking positions

in management. We must work out a strategy so that they go in there and change the attitudes of management."

"Do we take this as a threat and react by saying that anybody who crosses the floor into management is a class enemy who needs to be treated with contempt?" asks Vavi, "or do we say this transfer of working class people into management positions actually gives us an opportunity to begin to fundamentally transform the industries of this country so that they move away from serving the interests of the bourgeois class into industries that serve the interests of the broader working class? My view is that we should deliberately infiltrate some of our most trained working class elements into management so that we can change their agenda focus and their priorities to the priorities of all the people of South Africa."

Shilowa says this trend poses questions about the character of COSATU itself. "If we are serious about saying that training should be rewarded in terms of new career paths, new grading and higher wages, it goes without saying that people will have to move from some of the positions that they hold. Do we want to remain a blue collar federation or

do we want to become a federation of all workers? I would argue we want to become a federation of all workers in this country.

“The problem at the moment is the manner in which these promotions happen. Because it is not part of an agreed programme of grading, restructuring, retraining and career pathing, employers choose who they want to promote.”

Vavi admits that the loss of leadership has had a negative effect on the federation: “There may be different layers of leadership but the reality is that people don’t have the same capacities. The question is, after having lost these leaders, what do we do?”

He says COSATU needs to implement a programme of capacity building that will “take this comrade through these courses in order for him to represent us with the same quality as Alec Erwin was representing COSATU in the NEF”.

“But,” Shilowa says, “it’s also an indictment on those comrades that they have not been able to empower or to pass skills on to other comrades.”

Coleman says in recent years a culture of reliance on experts began to emerge in COSATU, which was accelerated with COSATU’s involvement in the NEF and National Manpower Commission (NMC). But, observes Coleman, the level of debate and participation has improved tremendously in recent months. The reliance on experts in COSATU is disappearing and new leadership is emerging to fill the gap left by those who left. This is regarded as one of the positive effects of the ‘brain drain’.

“One of the tunes taken by the media after we had ‘donated’ 76 people to parliament, was that COSATU is finished,” says Vavi. “They knew they were lying. But it’s because they were fighting an ideological battle to then say *oongqondo-ngqondo bemkile basepalamente, kushiyeke amagogogo* (all the brains have moved to parliament). The reality is that the weaknesses that are here now are weaknesses that were pointed out years back in various debates including in debates in the *Labour Bulletin*.”

Trade union unity

Unity has always eluded the trade union movement in South Africa. While COSATU’s stand in favour of one federation in one country is well known, the other federations point to COSATU’s alliance with political parties as a major obstacle. There was little progress on the issue until April this year when COSATU, NACTU and FEDSAL resolved to work towards greater unity of the labour movement in South Africa. On the ground though, some workers from the smaller federations seem to be voting with their feet by crossing over to join COSATU or its affiliates. This is best illustrated by the decision of one of FEDSAL’s biggest affiliates, SASBO, to apply for affiliation to COSATU.

“In past years the strategy was to hold worker conferences to discuss unity,” says Vavi, “but those conference always deadlocked because of certain differences. The best way of achieving unity is through unity in action – currently it is around our joint involvement in the National Manpower Commission, the National Economic Forum and so on. We have not been able to do anything fundamental since then (the April meeting) because we got engaged in preparing for the national congress.”

Gomomo says the notion that COSATU is being “led by the nose” by the ANC is unfounded: “...look which of these federations has been challenging the ANC government.”

“I think they (the other federations) have come to accept the leadership role of COSATU,” says Shilowa. “Whether it’s at the NEF or at the NMC it is our positions that are articulated. It is us who lead and make inputs on fundamental platforms. But we don’t intend to swallow anyone up.

“The one thing that we don’t accept is a confederation – that is, maintaining three or more federations under one umbrella. Either we merge all three federations or we merge the unions. But we don’t think that a merger comes by sitting idly – you engage in struggle.” ☆



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