

Cosatu sacks the praise singers at its key conference

Hundreds of foreign and local delegates and speakers – from across the political spectrum – gathered at Gallagher Estate in March 2005 to contribute towards Cosatu's assessment of the first decade of democracy. The **Labour Bulletin** reports some of these debates, which included some rather controversial and provocative views on the transition and the role of organised labour.

Those expecting a mere talk shop got a surprise when Cosatu's conference to celebrate ten years of democracy turned into robust and open discussion - largely due to the efforts of the Cosatu secretariat who invited participants and speakers from both the left and right, some of whom would never normally have been seen (or invited) at a Cosatu conference. A Cosatu official says it was an attempt by the

federation to 'reach out to intellectuals' as part of its efforts to ensure some strategic 'self-reflection. Which organisation would have the guts to bring its opposition into a forum for engagement', the officials asks.

The two main themes of the conference were:

- Political transformation and how this played out in relations to engagement with the state through social dialogue and other strategies, transformation of the state and engagement with other left parties and social movements.
- Socio-economic transformation, which assessed the state of the economy, employment trends, labour market transformation and social service delivery.

POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

Discussion in the first commission, which focused on two broad themes around social dialogue and the class struggle and the power of capital, highlighted the role played by Cosatu during the first ten years of democracy. Various presentations revealed what Cosatu had done, as part of its attempt to help shape the character of the transition. It supported government when introducing progressive policies and strongly and actively opposed it in respect of problematic policies. In its actions the labour movement consciously avoided adopting either of two extreme positions: being docile or subservient to government, or being over critical and oppositional when disagreeing with government. A good balance had to be struck, which saw labour engaging strategically and intelligently, around well-formulated propositions. This was done within the perspective that unions embrace a dual role of representing interests of their members and campaign for pro-poor policies at the same time.

In terms of achievements, Cosatu acknowledged that government had implemented progressive labour law policies



but some gains had been undercut by bad policy choices. Some gains, it was argued had been contradictory, with capital using crude strategies to undercut the existence of Nedlac, for example. Questions arose around who had the power and influence to drive policy and how unions could use working class power to counteract the power of capital. Adam Habib, a left-wing political analyst with the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), (see p34) argued that Cosatu is responsible for both its marginalisation by the ANC, as well as the ANC's neglect of the interests of the poor. It is Cosatu's unconditional support for the ANC and its availability and commitment to delivering it the vote of workers, that creates certainty in the electoral system and removes any basis for the ANC to worry about, and therefore work hard for, the vote of workers. This certainty weakens the vote as a pivotal political leverage in the hands of workers. For Habib, certainty and predictability cannot bring about human development.

Habib suggests that Cosatu should push for a constituency-based electoral system, pull out of the corporatist institutions like Nedlac (which are weak around hard policies and good only on soft ones) and work with social movements to campaign



COVER STORY

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COSATU CONFERENCE TO CELEBRATE TEN YEARS OF DEMOCRACY

for pro-poor policies and bargain with or pressurise the ANC to deliver. Whilst Habib argued that unions should withdraw from Nedlac, various presentations in the commission reaffirmed the importance of the institution to build working class power. It was agreed in the commission that there needs to be a deeper assessment of social dialogue. A related issue is the link between policy engagement and mobilisation. There is this tendency by unions to focus excessively on dialogue, and less (if at all) on mobilisation, when they engage around policy. This weakens policy engagement and gives it an elitist outlook.

During discussion in another commission on contesting power and transformation of the state, different views emerged around the state and whether it was a tool of capital, a neo-liberal state or a state captured by bureaucratic bourgeoisie. In terms of engagement with the state and social movements, it was acknowledged that unions, social movements and left parties were fragmented because of the impact of neo-liberalism. It was argued that the left continued to be defensive while the right continued to advance.

Left thinking academic Ashwin Desai gave a provocative presentation on the state of Cosatu and its options for future engagement (see p38). He argued that Cosatu should be engaging with social movements. He highlighted an impact issue around the role Cosatu should be playing in relation to forwarding a campaign around incomes rather than wages. This led to some discussion around the role of public service unions and their engagement with

communities. It was argued that social movements and unions could learn from each other and engage.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Commissions dealing with developments in the SA economy highlighted the changes in the economy and the labour market. Labour lawyer Anton Roskom (see p42) provided an in-depth analysis of the state of government's labour market policies introduced since 1994 and the challenges facing labour in ensuring their effective implementation. He touched on proposed labour market review processes and explored possible areas where changes could be effected.

Discussion around government's macroeconomic strategy proved rather interesting with input from free market advocates like John Kane-Berman of the SA Institute of Race Relations to more left views of economist A sghar Adalzadeh. Sampie Terreblanche, a renowned economist from Stellenbosch University argued in line with Adalzadeh that macroeconomic stability was attained at the expense of infrastructural development. He demonstrated that under the ANC government, unemployment increased, workers' share of national income decreased and the HIV/AIDS problem escalated. Also 'civil society organs for the poor were demobilised, leaving the poor without any bargaining power, when the middle class - white and black, have more influence over government policy. A delzadeh and Terreblanche regard the goal of redistributive and job-creating high growth as requiring expansion of public investments

in growth and jobs and increasing the capacity of the public sector. Essentially, you need serious ideological and policy shifts.

CONCLUSION

An assessment of Cosatu as an organisation revealed that due to internal weaknesses and capacity problems, the federation felt that it was not able to play a more effective role to deepen change. Some of the problem areas identified include

- Key policies and laws to transform the workplace were won. Very little was done to exploit these laws to benefit workers.
- Workers won half of the seats in the boards of retirement funds, but the opportunity was never used to direct investment of the R909- billion of assets in these funds, to fight unemployment and poverty.
- Weak presence of unions in the agriculture, domestic and informal sectors, and among certain groups of workers - casuals, part-time, young workers, call centre workers, etc; as well as limited capacity at various levels of the union movement, create huge obstacles for unions to be effective in engaging the state and capital.

The Cosatu secretariat took a bold move in opening itself up to comments and critiques by academics, activists and analysts they might normally have ignored either because of their overt left or right wing views. What remains now for Cosatu is to take an even bolder step and evaluate the diverse input received at the conference and determine how this process of self-reflection is to impact on the future of the federation.

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