

# When the going gets tough the tough go ... mudslinging

**S**peculating the end of the tripartite alliance between the ruling African National Congress (ANC), South African Communist Party (SACP) and Cosatu has become a favourite pastime amongst many across the political spectrum. There are individuals both on the right and left who would like to see an end to the alliance.

Predictions of a parting of the ways (or rising tensions) are traditionally rife when differences over policy direction spill over into the public domain or ahead of the national congresses of the alliance partners. The current period leading up to the ANC's national conference in December 2002 has been characterised both by rising tensions within the alliance but also a seemingly desperate need to reaffirm

the ANC's leadership of the national democratic revolution.

This need has led to the almost daily criticism and portrayal of Cosatu in the midst of an organisational crisis partly because an 'ultra-left' clique is misleading it (and members) and creating divisions over policy direction and its relationship with the ANC-led government. President Thabo Mbeki, in his recent weekly column on the ANC website, directly referred to Cosatu and its attempt to mislead members and pit them against the ANC and the government they elected. With reference to the privatisation strike, he said, it had failed 'more miserably than its predecessor ... They tell lies and claim easy victories because they are convinced that the masses they purport to represent are simple-minded, and only capable of responding to slogans, songs and the toyi-toyi ... This disastrous showing should have told them that they could never win the masses of the people to their side, by engaging in a desperate gamble to detach the masses from and

turn them against their organisation, the ANC.'

The picture has been rounded off with reports of allegations of corruption and mismanagement within Cosatu's key affiliates.

## **Corruption: A ploy to sideline political opponents?**

The reports focusing on mismanagement of funds, abuse of power and financial crisis attempt to discredit unions and individuals by claiming that all these allegations – many of which have not been investigated – are all aspects of corruption.

Corruption, as in many other countries, cuts across all strata of our society whether it is in government, the private sector or within organs of civil society such as unions. It should be noted however, that a number of the reports are around union investment companies and not the unions themselves. The media reports failed to distinguish between the two structures. There is concern within





Cosatu around how union investment companies are operating. Cosatu has not however, developed a clear approach on how this issue should be tackled. The *Labour Bulletin* interviews Hassan Lorgat (p12) about issues around corruption and transparency within unions and organisations in civil society. His interview highlights the need for a clear understanding of what constitutes corruption. Lorgat points to some worrying trends in terms of the timing of the release of damaging information into the public domain. Could there be an argument for assuming that selected information of so-called acts of corruption is being released at strategic times to either sideline individuals because of their political leanings or to discredit them so that the spotlight does not fall on the real culprits of abuse of power, mismanagement, double-dealings and corruption?

#### **Is Cosatu facing an organisational crisis?**

Cosatu is increasingly being portrayed

as an organisation in crisis. A former trade unionist flippantly remarked: 'When are unions not in a crisis. It is the nature of unionism, they are continually fighting fires. There is never real stability in unions. What is different now to previous years?' He added, 'and why the fixation on a so-called ultra-left grouping. There have always been different political tendencies both within Cosatu and the ANC.'

Cosatu's so-called organisational crisis has been attributed, by some within the ANC as relating to the following types of issues:

- loss of experienced leadership post-1994;
- the rapid growth of unions such as those in the public sector, which has put pressure on these structures;
- the challenges the federation faces in dealing with globalisation, restructuring and adapting to the new way in which capital has restructured itself. This has created difficulties for unions to be able to recruit new members.

The federation is not immune to self-critique and reflection as evident by the drafting and publication of the September Commission Report in 1997 and the more recent Report of the Organisational Review Commission, which was completed last year. These reports address the contextual challenges facing trade unions in South Africa. The key points to emerge from both reports include the following:

- Conditions of struggle have changed: during the 1980s unions were driven by mass militancy and creativity from below.
- Politically, the establishment of democratic government, which has transformed the conditions of members and shopstewards and has opened the door to more complex engagement on policy issues than in the past.
- Economically, massive loss of formal jobs and rapidly rising unemployment, together with a shift to casual and informal employment.
- Organisationally, an expansion in the size and complexity of the



federation, coupled with shrinking membership in some affiliates and fast growth in others. This makes it increasingly difficult to sustain democracy, effectiveness and creativity. Organisational changes have also seen the emergence of some concerning organisational trends.

One of the key organisational problems Cosatu is facing is the loss of membership which has an effect on finances. Aside from this unions have been forced to review their organisational structures to ensure accountability is retained.

Traditionally, South African unions base their model on the British experience where general secretaries are more prominent than presidents who occupy part-time positions and are generally based in a workplace. This model has begun to change as unions have grown. Unions such as NUM and Nehawu now have full-time presidents and office bearers. This in itself brings new tensions and dynamics into the union (as with any other organisation) as the change in structure could require proper and clear redefinition of roles: in a way the general secretary and president become two leaders on the same level and this could lead to tension or turf battles. Who is ultimately then in control?

Why is Cosatu now being portrayed as being in a crisis? Is it because it is being perceived as being obstructionist and unstrategic because of the recent strike or because there is a view that it is openly challenging government? In the same way as the ultra-left labelling has become an irritation and area of contestation within Cosatu so too have ANC ministers become sensitive to constant criticism of their policies with no acknowledgement of the successes.

The view that ANC ministers are the 'enemy of the people' and the real problem behind the lack of transformation is beginning to wear thin.

It is often all too convenient to attribute blame elsewhere when your own structures are not sound. A former trade unionist says, 'why are people saying there is only a crisis in Cosatu? There might be some weaknesses but the same is true for the ANC and SACP. The question to be asked is why are those weaknesses there? Is the ANC giving proper leadership and what is it doing to strengthen both its own structures and those of Cosatu?' He says the existing problems are not only about Cosatu but about the ANC as well. In the good old days leaders used to say: A strong Cosatu is a strong ANC and strong SACP.

In the current climate, with high levels of tension and sensitivities ahead of the national conference, it is far easier to attribute blame to Cosatu or to dream up conspiracy theories around an ultra-left clique. 'Why look for conspiracies when the social movements coming to the fore are mobilising around real tangible issues?' NUM general secretary **Gwede Mantashe** explores the notion of whether Cosatu is in a crisis or not. See p14.

#### **Relationship between Cosatu and ANC**

Focus on a so-called ultra-left grouping in Cosatu became more pronounced following the release of the (now infamous) briefing notes at the time of an ANC national executive committee meeting last year. This meeting took place following the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), which saw the emergence of social groupings articulating anti-alliance sentiments.

Talk of the ultra-left has continued to plague Cosatu especially in the period leading up to the recent anti-privatisation strike. The impression was created that this grouping has misdirected and lied to grassroots members as part of an attempt to forward their own agenda and discredit the ANC-led government.

There have been various calls over the years for the alliance partners to redefine how they engage. Cosatu feels the space for engagement has become limited and criticism is not welcomed. A Cosatu official says an emerging problem in the ANC is a lack of tolerance and questioning of policy. 'At times it is often only Cosatu that is criticising government upfront and ministers do not take lightly to this. This raises the question around management styles and whether ministers encourage such engagement in their own departments.'

(The view that the ANC is not open to or tolerant of criticism has become an area of concern. Hence, the level of debate and engagement at the recent ANC policy conference pleasantly surprised alliance partners.)

From the ANC's side there is some acknowledgement that there are a lot of problems in government as a result of the disempowerment of political leadership as a result of the bureaucracy. However, there is concern over the manner in which Cosatu raises its concerns and its attempt to use the alliance structures as another bargaining forum to negotiate disagreements. 'The overriding concern is that Cosatu needs to change its strategy of engagement with the alliance and to decide if it wants to continue using mass power to change government policy or consider other approaches.' A Cosatu official says 'the feeling is that government does not





Left: Cosatu general secretary  
Zwelinzima Vavi



listen to Cosatu unless it uses power. If we do not use power government ignores us and if we do then they get mad at us.'

The contestation around privatisation is a useful example of how the relationship sometimes plays itself out. Government believes it has engaged while Cosatu does not share this view. A former government official says privatisation has become the ideological battleground between the parties. He says government in fact has taken a rather conservative approach to privatisation and full-scale privatisation is not taking place. An alliance source says Cosatu does have a point in its criticism of public enterprises as it has failed to conduct proper impact studies around some of the restructuring. However, in the same vein Cosatu has generalised the debate and calls everything privatisation. It is seen to oppose everything despite agreements having been reached in some sectors. Some of these deals, such as in forestry, have now created problems not only for government but Cosatu as well as speculation of bribes on both sides emerge.

Numerous attempts have been

made to resolve differences, but to what end? Are both parties expressing irreconcilable contradictions? The key issue here is not the Alliance but the relationship with government when it ignores the ANC and its policies

#### **Cosatu caught between a rock and a hard place**

Some within the alliance would argue that attempts to portray Cosatu or some of its leaders, as being ultra-left is a way for the ANC to protect itself from credible 'left' thinkers who have been critical of government policy from the outset. This might well be the case ahead of the national conference. Whatever the agenda, there are attempts to constrain labour from within the ranks of the ANC. At the same time, Cosatu is facing pressure from the left who claim that it is being subservient to the ANC as it will not challenge the alliance. On page 16 Leonard Gentle explores the development of social movements in South Africa and what challenges they pose for Cosatu.

The irony of Cosatu's 'ultra-left' labelling is that it is by its very nature a reformist organisation as is the ANC. Cosatu (like the ANC) has shown since

its inception its ability to engage, negotiate and compromise. However, its responsibility is to defend its organisation from the ravages of global capital and herein lies the potential for state repression, an observer says. The state itself is in a contradictory position as it is acting as the intermediary for global capital and as such would want to constrain labour. The situation is no different in many other parts of the world at present.

Overt or covert attempts to discredit Cosatu should not however, be used as an excuse by the federation to ignore the real challenges that do exist. A failure to deal with issues around accountability and worker control, governance and financial mismanagement has the potential to destabilise any organisation whether it be a corporate or trade union. ■