

Is it a party for unions being in the Party?

With the unbanning of political organisations in 1990, a number of senior Cosatu leaders emerged as being key within the SA Communist Party. Since then the Party has sought to ensure its power base, to some extent, through the unions. **Devan Pillay** explores this relationship and the implications of the growing alliance between the Party and Cosatu.

At the launch of the SACP as a legal party in Johannesburg on 29 July, 1990 after almost 40 years of illegality, the party announced that four of the most prominent trade union leaders were part of its internal leadership group. They included Numsa's Moses Mayekiso and John Gomomo, Fawu's Chris Dlamini, and Cosatu's Sydney Mafumadi. The group will oversee the building of the party in the run-up to its 70th birthday congress in July 1991. It has been evident in the months after the February unbanning that Cosatu was replacing SACTU as a close ally of the party. This has been a development ever since Cosatu was formed in 1985, and for many people it represents a major advance in the working class struggle. But what surprised many was the emergence of such high-profile Cosatu leaders as SACP leaders. In particular, the Numsa unionists who were in the past labelled as 'workerists' by some. Their appointments have also surprised those who believe that Cosatu leaders should not occupy leadership posts in political organisations, and that such structures should be separate and distinct.

In March the party and Cosatu restated the necessity of the federation to remain independent of political organisations 'as a matter of principle and practice'. These appointments raise questions about what exactly is meant by trade union independence. Have these unionists been 'co-opted' into a party that pays 'lip-service' to union independence and democracy? Or do these appointments instead reflect a growing influence of the unions on a party that has genuinely moved away from the 'Stalinist' attitudes and practices of its past? Or should these appointments be simply seen as a vote of confidence by the unionists in a party that has always led the struggle against capitalist exploitation?



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BELOW: Former Cosatu general secretary Jay Naidoo with the late Chris Hani and others at a march.



JOINING THE PARTY

None of the unionists will say exactly when they joined. Dlamini says: 'I was recruited by members of the party, but cannot give details yet'. While he cannot give a date, Mayekiso says he has 'been a party member for a long time'. He read about the party through his trade union work, and met party members while outside the country. Gomomo reveals that he had contact with the party cadres in the underground for a long time, but took great care not to reveal his sympathies. These unionists joined the party because they saw the need for a strong political organisation that would facilitate the leading role of the working class in the struggle for national democracy. They felt that there was no other organisation capable of performing this task, given that the trade unions cannot act as political parties. Mayekiso points out that, while working in the community, he realised that the party had a following, as it did amongst workers in the workplace. The SACP, he believes, must be a home for all socialists.

WEARING DIFFERENT HATS

Cosatu has begun to discuss the desirability of its top leadership occupying highly placed positions in political parties. There is a strong feeling that this should be avoided, as it could lead to a conflict of interests, and divert attention away from the particular needs of the unions. This feeling was strengthened when the NUM's Cyril Ramaphosa was drawn away from the union to run the National Reception Committee, and assisted Mandela on his release from prison. Many felt that the union suffered as a result. The unionists, however, see no immediate problem being in the top leadership of both Cosatu and the party. They all stress that they are elected office bearers of the unions, but not of the SACP, where their positions are temporary until the leadership elections next July. They are thus trade unionists 'first and foremost', and are bound by the 'democracy and processes of the unions'. Mayekiso feels that if organised workers are to influence the party, then they cannot be expected to 'shout at the party'

from a distance. They have to participate in the leadership at a local, regional and national level. Workers are going to elect their experienced leaders into those positions. However, this does not mean that the whole leadership of Cosatu should be 'swallowed' into the leadership of the party. There is a difference between occupying controlling positions (such as the general secretary's position) of both structures, and merely being members of the executive.

THE ALLIANCE

The structures of the ANC, the party and unions must be kept separate, the unionists argue, such that one does not control the others. If there is a conflict of interests, says Mayekiso, the conduct of an individual will depend on the mandate he or she is representing. Thus if, within the alliance, an individual comes with a mandate from the union, then that mandate has to be carried out even if that individual personally believes it to be wrong. Ideally, the alliance will take decisions by consensus, in the interests of all three formations. The immediate task of the party is to build the ANC, in order to ensure that the working class, as the majority, plays a dominant role. But that does not mean that the party should suspend building its mass presence. The role of the party in this phase is to ensure a 'socialist voice' in the alliance. The alliance, says Dlamini, 'may not exist forever'. An ANC government will have to accommodate a range of interests, including that of employers. The party, on the other hand, speaks purely for the working class, and will seek to ensure that the interests of that class are defended and promoted. Thus the right to strike, even against state-controlled industries under a democratic government, has to be guaranteed.

In terms of the union's specific role in the alliance, Mafumadi said that while the primary task remains to 'build a strong union movement on the ground', Cosatu will continue to promote workers' interests within the liberation movement, rather than 'depend on promises that are made by our allies'.

BUILDING THE ANC

Gomomo feels that, while recruiting for the party, 'we must be careful not to undermine the ANC. It is the godfather of the liberation movement, and it is preferable that people join both the ANC and the party'. However, he adds that party membership should be emphasised to workers, because it is the party that will further the long-term interests of the working class within the alliance. While it is clear that the party is going to transform itself in the coming months, Gomomo feels that it is difficult to predict what the party will look like in a few years time. The evolution of the alliance could mean that the ANC becomes the mass socialist party. There may no longer be any need to have separate structures, but one united force.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE UNIONS

At the first meeting of the party's internal leadership group in May, according to Gomomo, the party was careful not to impose itself on the unions. In fact, the unionists were asked to guide the party with ideas on how to establish itself as a democratic organisation with proper structures of accountability.

The unions have played a vital role in moving the party away from the dogmatic and sectarian aspects of its past. Their influence will increase, feels Gomomo, because the thousands of new members will come primarily from the unions. Therefore, any remaining traces of 'Stalinist' influence in the party are likely to be swamped by the democratic experiences of organised workers. Others argue that there are enough examples of 'Stalinist' practices in some unions, which point to a less optimistic scenario (for example see the case of Fawu). Nevertheless, the party's commitment to open debate and discussion is unlikely to be a passing phase, but something that is deeply entrenched. The unionists see their task as organising workers into the party, and 'conscientising' them about socialist values and principles, as well as helping to shape party structures, its policies and a new constitution.



NEGOTIATIONS

It has not yet been decided whether Cosatu and the party will be represented as separate entities (from the ANC, and from each other) at the negotiating table with the government, once all obstacles are removed. A Numsa CEC resolution in May calls for Cosatu members of the negotiating team to be democratically elected by the Cosatu CEC. It also proposes that an Alliance Forum be formed, which will consist of executive members of the three formations. Cosatu will first adopt its own position, and will take it to the Forum where an alliance position will be formulated. One way or another, says Gomomo, the views of Cosatu and the party will be represented at the negotiating table. Earlier Mafumadi pointed out that the key was to 'strike a balance

between those negotiations and the mass component of the struggle. We must ensure that we do not demobilise ourselves ... and that the voice of the masses, at the workplace and in the communities, is heard'

THREE FOSATU STREAMS

With the exception of Mafumadi, who came from the UDF-aligned General and Allied Workers Union (Gawu) into Cosatu, all these unionists come out of the old Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) tradition, which merged with the Congress-oriented unions to form Cosatu in 1985. Fosatu itself was formed in 1979 out of the newly emerging Transvaal and Natal unions, which were formed in the wave, and ex-Trade Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) unions. The most prominent of the new

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unions was the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu), from which Moses Mayekiso emerged as a leader in the Transvaal.

Another important current, which formed Fosatu, was the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (Naawu), which were formed out of unions which broke away from the conservative white-dominated TUCSA. John Gomomo emerged out of this union in the Eastern Cape, as a shop steward at Volkswagen's Uitenhage plant. Mawu and Naawu later combined with another ex TUCSA union, the Motor Industry Combined Workers Union (Micwu), to form NUMSA in 1987.

Chris Dlamini rose out of yet another stream, which formed Fosatu, namely those unions which left the black exclusivist-oriented Consultative Committee of Black Trade Unions, which refused to become part of Fosatu and formed the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) instead. In 1977 Dlamini became a shop steward of the Springs Kellogg's branch of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union (SFAWU which merged with the Food and Canning Workers Unions to form Fawu in 1986). He became president of Fosatu in 1982, at a time when it faced strong criticism for being 'workerist'.

THE CHANGE OF 'WORKERISM'

The 1982 Fosatu congress adopted a report by its general-secretary, Joe Foster, which outlined its political policy. Until then Fosatu had not declared itself politically, and was seen by critics in the Congress movement, including the SACP, to be 'avoiding' politics. This was partly because the emerging unions in the 1970s, when state repression was very severe, had consciously decided to try and avoid state-power politics while they concentrated their energy on building a viable and deeply-rooted trade union movement. But conditions had changed in the early 1980s, when politically committed unions like the South African Allied Workers

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Union (Saawu) emerged, with an activism that stood in direct contrast to the workplace-oriented, relatively cautious Fosatu unions. Community organisations, and initially unions like the Cape Town-based FCWU and General Workers Union (GWU), formed a close alliance with them. The Fosatu unions, however, refused to accept that they were abstaining from politics. They felt that organising workers into an effective force against capital was political, and there was no way that they could ignore the state in this battle.

The 1982 position paper was therefore a response to their critics. While it recognised the important role the ANC had played in the struggle against apartheid, the paper spoke of the need to build an independent working class movement, which could engage effectively at the level of state-power politics. Although the paper did not make specific proposals, one of the possibilities was the union movement directly performing this function, and another was building a working class party, which by implication would be in opposition to the SACP. The paper was severely criticised by 'Toussaint' in the African Communist (No 83, 1983), who pointed out that there was not even a mention of the SACP in the paper. Yet the party has been instrumental in forming the first black industrial unions during the 1930s and 1940s, and had played a vital role in building mass resistance to apartheid throughout its history. The Fosatu paper was also criticised for suggesting that the unions substitute themselves for the SACP, when the party was still alive and fighting. A competing 'working class movement' would confuse and further divide the working class, argued Toussaint.

For many Fosatu supporters this criticism amounted to a 'Stalinist' desire to control the unions. Thus Dlamini was eagerly quoted in 1984 as saying, after visiting Zimbabwe, that workers would not be liberated without an independent workers' movement. This was

seen by such supporters as an endorsement of the Fosatu position paper. When Fosatu refused to join the UDF in 1983, this was seen by many Congress supporters as yet another display of abstentionism. But both criticisms were too simple, and displayed a lack of understanding of the complexities of both positions. As Gomomo points out later, the unions did not want to simply 'avoid' politics. They were primarily concerned about building viable democratic organisations that would give content and meaning to the notion of 'working class leadership'. However, many of these unionists were suspicious of the intentions of the Congress organisations, which were concerned about the need to build a united front against the ominous 'total strategy' of the ruling class. If the unions were slow to grasp the imperatives of state-power politics, then the community groups were too quick to dismiss the imperatives of production politics. The task is to combine both spheres of resistance in a careful and balanced way.

TURNING POINT

A turning point came in 1984, when Fosatu allied with the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) in Transvaal, to organise a massive stayaway in protest against worsening conditions at schools and in the townships. Both Dlamini and Mayekiso played a crucial role in organising the stayaways, and with three UDF activists Mayekiso was detained. Although many Fosatu unionists were opposed to the action, a dominant position emerged which argued that Fosatu ought to engage in overt political action, provided the unions were involved in planning it. In the Eastern Cape, however, mutual suspicion between Fosatu and the UDF organisations was still high. The unions did not support a stayaway in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage planned for March 1985, because they felt that they were not properly consulted. According to Gomomo, the fact that the unions were consulted at

all, compared to previous practices, signified an improvement in relations since the Transvaal stayaways. This was especially so in Uitenhage, where relations were smoother than in Port Elizabeth.

Gomomo feels strongly that Fosatu was never 'apolitical'. Its aim was to build trade unions at the grassroots, so that they could not be easily crushed by the state. Its intention all along he says, was to build an 'independent, non-racial, non-sexist trade union movement that was controlled by workers'. Their full participation and control over their affairs at the shopfloor would equip workers to also have control over their affairs in the community. That is why great emphasis was placed on leadership accountability and mandates from the people.

Community activists, says Gomomo, misunderstood the intentions of Fosatu, and felt that it was using the notions of accountability and mandates to avoid engaging in community struggles. They often called Fosatu 'reactionary'. In Gomomo's view, then, a cautious attitude to state-power politics, which emphasised building strong durable organisations before engaging in overt political action against the state, was confused with a desire to avoid politics altogether. But as time went on, he says, it became generally understood that in order to seriously democratise organisations, mandates and accountability had to be respected.

Since its formation in 1985, Cosatu rapidly identified itself with the Congress movement, and increasingly played a high profile political role. Dlamini and SFAWU had already been moving closer to a Congress perspective from at least early 1985 and this continued after Fawu was formed. However, until recently Numsa was still seen as 'workerist' by many Congress activists. In 1985-6 Mayekiso had been 'adopted' by the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in Britain, and they played a central role in the

Free Mayekiso campaign when he was detained in 1986 for almost three years. The British Anti-Apartheid Movement distanced itself from this campaign because of the SWP connection, and this gave the impression that it, and by association the alliance, did not want to campaign for Mayekiso's release.

Some Congress supporters viewed the 1987 Numsa resolution to the Cosatu congress on the Freedom Charter, which called for a Workers' Charter, with suspicion. Since then a new consensus within Cosatu has emerged. While the old workerist-populist debate has ceased to occupy the minds of activists, new concerns have emerged. These relate to specific questions of organisation, and the nature of the alliance.

VOICES OF CONCERN

Some prominent unionists in Cosatu do not intend to join the party, although they broadly support it. Their concerns are that, whatever the intentions, when there are two structures operating at the workplace, one will inevitably wither away. As one unionist said, 'workers can see which structure has real power', and this is the one they will turn to. Experience in the 'socialist' countries is that the democratic structures of the unions gave way to the party structures.

If this is not to happen, argues this unionist, then there must be a clear formal relationship between these structures. It is not enough that they should merely be separate. The party structure must be 'subservient' to the trade union structure. The role of the party should be to generate ideas, which could be accepted or rejected by the unions. They should not have their own decision-making powers at the workplace. A related view concerns the relationship between the party and the ANC. It is not clear, in this view, how one can be both a member of the ANC, and do justice to both. If the party becomes a mass party of the working class, it should be a truly independent socialist party that has a loose alliance with the ANC, where there is no overlapping leadership wearing two hats.

Alternatively, it is argued, the party should exist as an open tendency or faction, alongside other open tendencies, within the ANC. These tendencies would not operate secretly (as the Marxist Workers Tendency in the ANC and Cosatu does at present). Any ANC member would be allowed to attend their meetings, as they would seek to influence the ANC in a democratic manner. But they would not be formalised parties such as the SACP is, where lines of demarcation are blurred and confusing. In both these cases the party can escape the charge of being a 'broederbond' within the ANC.

OPTIONS FACING THE PARTY

These are real concerns, which need to be openly debated within the liberation alliance. The party has indicated that it will be organised into branches according to residential areas, and not workplaces, which seems to lessen the danger of party structures dominating union structures. Nevertheless, while it is clear that the intentions of the party and its supporters in the unions is not to allow either structure to be dominated by the other, these issues will only become real once party structures are actually operating. As Gomomo has said, it is the unions that have guided the party on how to structure its legal presence. They have indicated an awareness of the possible pitfalls that await them in the coming months, and it is unlikely that the unionists will sit back and allow union structures to be (unintentionally) undermined. If the party is careful not to impose itself on the unions, as Gomomo states, then it is very likely that the party would be open to modifying its structures if the unions find them unworkable.

As far as the ANC-SACP relationship is concerned, it seems unrealistic to expect the party to either suddenly dissolve itself and become a mere 'tendency' within the ANC, or give up the strategic position it has in the ANC. The party has devoted much of its post-world war two existence to painstakingly building this alliance, and has succeeded in ensuring that, at the very least,

the ANC is not an anti-communist movement.

On the contrary, the ANC has moved very far along the road to being a revolutionary nationalist movement that is sensitive to the needs of its predominantly working class constituency. Much of the credit for this must go to the SACP. An ANC that is abandoned to the middle class is exactly the sort of ANC the government and big business would like to deal with. If the party were to distance itself from the ANC, it runs the risk of playing right into the hands of De Klerk.

As Gomomo points out, it is very possible that the ANC and the party could merge into one mass socialist movement. If this is to happen, then the party had a vital role to play to ensure that the socialist voice is heard. Nevertheless, the argument that the socialist voice can be asserted through organised open tendencies within the ANC, without the need for a separate party, cannot be rejected out of hand. It may well resolve the ambiguities that exist at present about the precise role of the party in the coming months, and the need to avoid a duplication of functions, and a dispersal of limited resources.

But it is also possible that the party could face pressure from within to distance itself from the ANC, and become either a critical partner in a looser alliance, or (less likely) a left opposition. If the party becomes a home for all socialists, including those in Nactu and even WOSA, and if the negotiations process becomes too removed from the masses (while at the same time drawing the ANC into major compromises with the regime), then this pressure could become irresistible. Whichever path the party eventually takes, it is likely that the unions will play a crucial role in determining that direction. While socialism is on the retreat in most parts of the world, conditions in South Africa have never been more favourable for the emergence of a truly democratic, mass socialist party.

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