

June 2nd aftermath

defining a role for COSATU

While it may be incorrect to totally tie the rhythms and role of labour movements to governments' terms of office, the ANC's return for its second term of office makes it essential for the union movement to define its role. Being the biggest federation in the country and with a tradition of shaping the South African labour scene, COSATU has the task of defining its attitudes to the incoming government's plans and outlining its role for the coming period.

Delivery to the poor

The biggest challenge facing COSATU in the post election period is ensuring change that will better the lives of its members, the working class and the poor. Having canvassed and set aside resources for a decisive ANC electoral victory, COSATU has the responsibility to see that the ANC in government delivers to the broad constituency that the federation represents and is aligned to.

This is not going to be an easy task. If one goes by the experience of the last five years, good manifesto proposals do not necessarily lead to actual delivery. In 1994, the ANC and its allies were united around the RDP, but as we saw, implementation of the RDP was difficult. As the clamour by all and sundry to embrace the RDP intensified, a battle was launched by the ruling class - its institutions and representatives - to corrode the

Dinga Sikwebu argues that COSATU needs to develop a political programme and address organisational weaknesses to ensure government delivers to the working class and the poor.

framework that underpinned the programme. The outcome of this battle was government's adoption of GEAR - a macro-economic framework which labour described as the opposite of the RDP.

Even in this round, the jury is still out on whether government will implement what is contained in the ANC election manifesto. Before the ink was dry on ballot papers, government proposed to fast-track the privatisation of state assets. Government is also determined to 'rightsize' the public service without a social audit and without an agreed framework for restructuring.

More than in the pre-elections period, government representatives have emphasised the continuity of policies. The Ministry of Finance has emphasised that there will be no change of course in relation to fiscal and monetary policies. According to the Minister of Trade and Industry, trade liberalisation will continue.

We have also seen the re-emergence of vocabulary and acronyms like 'GEAR' and 'privatisation' that had disappeared in the pre-election campaign. While we were made to believe by union leadership and intellectuals aligned to the federation that a post-GEAR consensus existed within the alliance, recent statements have left no doubt of the ANC government's intention to continue with policies that led to little or no growth, employment and redistribution for the poor.

Unless the ANC government puts some of the policies pursued before elections into reverse gear, the chances of realising the promise of accelerated change and speedy delivery of basic needs, will be remote if not nil.

To ensure that its members were not used as voting cattle and that there is delivery to the poor, COSATU needs:

- a conscious plan to forge alliances with social forces and organisations that aim to better the lives of the poor;
- to draft a political programme to guide its intervention;
- to develop a multi-pronged strategy of intervention;
- a programme to build the union movement.

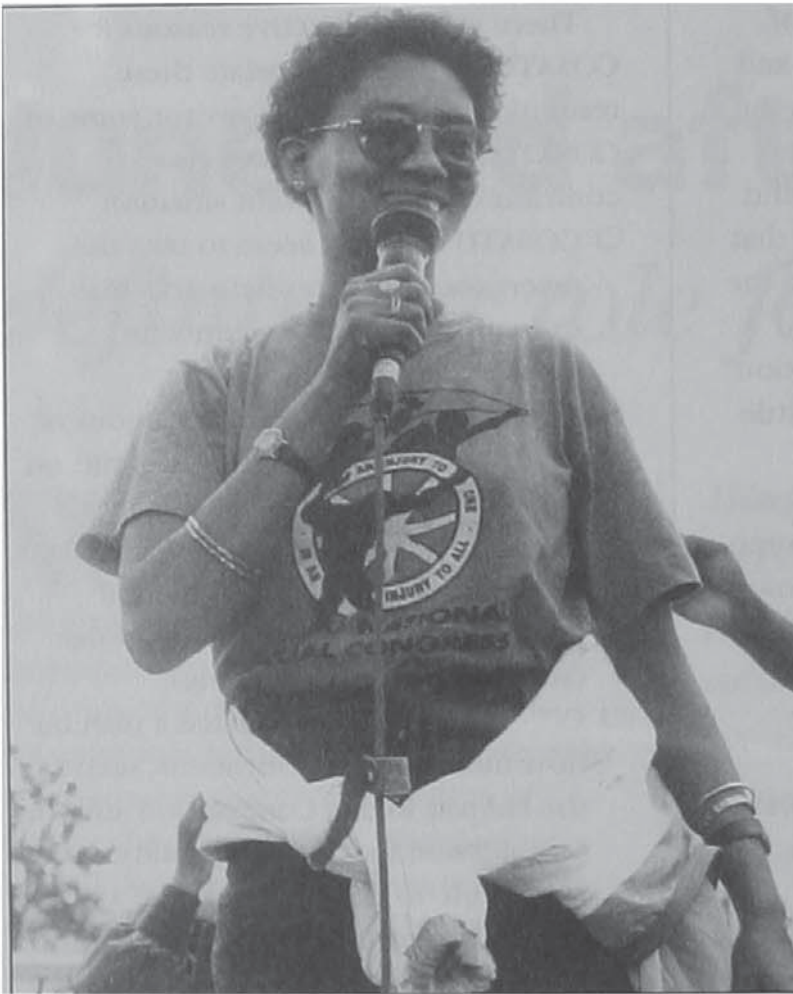
Leader of 'civil society'

Despite its weaknesses, COSATU remains the strongest mass formation. Other weak national, provincial and local mass formations exist, such as student and youth organisations, unemployed groups, civics, and women's groups. Many NGOs also still exist.

Despite the many resolutions to revive the mass democratic movement and build a popular movement for transformation, COSATU has been unable to successfully link up with and strengthen other organisations. There has been no revival of the mass democratic movement.

There may be objective reasons for COSATU's failure to translate these resolutions into reality. However, some of COSATU's approaches have also contributed to the present situation:

- COSATU does not seem to take the emergence of sector networks (for example, the rural development network) seriously.
- COSATU also seems contemptuous of single-issue coalitions (for example, on debt) and other NGOs. Besides not connecting up with these organisations, COSATU has not championed the problems facing these organisations (such as decreasing funding).
- COSATU has not formulated a plan on how independent institutions, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Commission for Gender Equality, may contribute to the emergence of a broad movement for transformation. COSATU's silence was deafening when these independent institutions (set up in terms of Chapter 9 of the Constitution) battled with the state over their independence.
- Although always strongly denied, a tendency has developed within COSATU to approach issues from a narrow 'workerist' perspective. What is its position on the R29-billion arms procurement deal, besides the few words on workers' jobs in the armaments industry? Why are there no visible campaigns by public sector affiliates beyond the fights against privatisation, unilateral restructuring and outsourcing. An active campaign against corruption and for clean government can win allies for COSATU's campaign in defence of the state.
- Although debatable in terms of the benefits, COSATU has prioritised its historical and traditional allies such as



Many September Commission resolutions were meant to address organisational challenges.

the ANC and SACP. COSATU is not actively taking part in or has withdrawn from a number of initiatives both at national and regional levels. One suspects the reason is that participation may upset the relationship within the alliance. How else can one explain the federation's lukewarm attitude to the Jubilee 2000 campaign on debt?

In a context of strong criticism that COSATU and unions represent an elite, the federation cannot afford to retreat from the social movement unionism that characterised its approach in the 1980s and early 1990s. COSATU must link with other social forces that have similar objectives. It must revive the tradition of taking up issues that affect the poor, even if these are not concerns of its immediate constituency.

This is not a call for COSATU to pretend to speak for everyone. It is not a call for COSATU to jump into every campaign or to embrace every organisation. We cannot deny the weaknesses of some of the campaigns that have been taken by forces outside COSATU or some organisations' organisational methods.

COSATU has the responsibility to assist these organisations and strengthen progressive campaigns. While most of the initiatives lack a mass base and rely on lobbying rather than organising, the issues that they deal with affect COSATU's members and may be broad working class concerns. COSATU should connect with these initiatives and organisations on issues of commonality. COSATU must win its place as the leader of civil society.

Political programme

To emerge as the leader of civil society, COSATU must have a political programme to:

- ensure delivery to the poor;
- build a movement for transformation;
- guide its intervention.

Since the formalisation of the ANC-COSATU-SACP alliance in the early 1990s, there has been talk within COSATU of the need for a common alliance programme. Although having proved illusive in the past, with government's abandonment of the RDP in its first term of office, there will again be calls for a common alliance programme.

It is time that COSATU learns from its past. What will make the emergence of a common alliance programme possible now? What will ensure that whatever

common programme is agreed to, is implemented?

As a priority, COSATU needs to formulate its own political programme. In doing this, COSATU should identify social forces that can be rallied in pursuit of the programme.

The programme that COSATU drafts must be popular and rooted within the working class. It must outline the manner through which COSATU hopes to intervene and what COSATU should take into the alliance. It must say what COSATU will do internally and what issues COSATU will take up, take to government and take to bosses. It must say, unashamedly, what COSATU would take onto the street.

Basis of a programme

Over the last few years, COSATU has formulated policy after policy. In 1996, it produced *Social Equity - A Strategy for Job Creation*, which it considered to be its socio-economic policy framework.

COSATU consolidated socio-economic policies adopted in previous congresses and conferences, at its inaugural Central Committee in September 1998. These policies aim to improve the lives of the working class.

Unfortunately, government never adopted any of these policies, despite COSATU's claims that the frameworks were consistent with the RDP. The government and particularly the Ministry of Finance had a scornful attitude to COSATU's socio-economic policies and proposals.

In formulating a political programme, we do not need another book of policies. We need an urgent answer on how COSATU's vision can become a dominant discourse in South Africa. Though not an easy task, COSATU needs to draft a political programme to guide its intervention.

While guided by its broad vision for socialism, COSATU must carefully choose immediate issues it will intervene on, to better the lives of the working class and the poor. This selection will help kick-start drafting a political programme. When drafting its programme, COSATU should not avoid issues that will dominate public policy debate in the coming period. These include:

- the expected report on the feasibility of a comprehensive social security system;
- privatisation of state assets;
- government's determination to downsize the public service;
- job losses;
- monitoring agreements from the Jobs Summit.

But COSATU must not confine itself to socio-economic issues and issues that deal with the physical existence of the working class. It must fight to defend and extend democracy. COSATU's political programme must outline:

- measures on how to make government more accountable and accessible;
- steps to fight over-centralisation of power;
- steps to strengthen the legislative arms of the government and the institutions that elected representatives serve on, in relation to the executive;
- measures to defend independent bodies with a public mandate, such the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).

Only such a programme will capture the imagination of the federation's membership and the broader working class. Only a programme of struggle can tilt the scale in favour of the poor. No amount of sweet-talking within the alliance will benefit the working class.

Independence

The required political programme will not emerge unless the culture of political



Zwelinzima Vavi admits COSATU's weaknesses when it comes to campaigns.

debate is revived. One of the most worrying developments within COSATU has been the absence of vibrant political debate.

Comfort has been drawn from the fact that unlike the 1980s, COSATU's political perspectives have not been a product of intense disagreement and debate amongst affiliates. There has been satisfaction with the ease with which political positions are formulated within the federation. This would not be a problem if it were a product of political debate within the organisation. What happened to the socialist forums that were agreed to in the 1997 national congress which were to serve as a platform for debate within COSATU? Judging from preparation for national meetings, the extent and quality

of political debate within affiliates is questionable.

Another condition for the emergence of a political programme described above, is strict adherence to COSATU's principle of political independence. While the coming period should be an era of coalitions and forging of alliances, the labour movement's political independence should be jealously guarded.

Building a strong federation

COSATU may adopt well formulated policies and political programmes. However, if it does not have a strong organisational base, such policies and political programmes are not worth the paper they are written on.

Recent surveys, however questionable their methodology may be, reveal a "growing gap" between leadership and rank and

file. They reveal that a tiny minority within the federation fully understands the policies that are formulated.

A recent report by the registrar of unions shows a high growth of unions not affiliated to any existing federation in the country. COSATU has also lost members through job shedding in the sectors that form the core of its organisational base. These developments as well as the growth of atypical forms of employment (such as independent contractors and casuals) undermine COSATU and pose organisational challenges.

If COSATU wants to have an impact in the coming period, it needs to deal with these organisational challenges. Delegates at the federation's 6th national congress in 1997, adopted a number of resolutions and

recommendations made by the September Commission. Many of the resolutions were meant to address the above-mentioned problems. What we need now is not a re-invention of the wheel, but an assessment of how far the organisation has gone in implementing the resolutions on strengthening the federation.

COSATU needs to soberly and honestly say whether the recurring nature of these organisational weaknesses is due to problems of implementation or the absence of a political compass.

Organisational weaknesses are sometimes reflections of a deeper political problem and confusion. COSATU needs to establish the source of the problem. It must guard against the danger of reducing organisational problems to narrow concerns of organisational development (OD).

A multi-pronged strategy

COSATU needs to enhance its intervention at various levels to achieve the above. Presently, the federation intervenes in various institutions, in different ways and at different levels. Affiliates are involved in bargaining. There is work on socio-economic policies at Nedlac. There is also engagement within the alliance.

There may be pressure on COSATU (from within and outside) to reduce the range of fronts it intervenes on. However, for the reasons outlined above, COSATU cannot afford to retreat from political unionism into defensive unionism – concerning itself only with bread and butter issues confronting membership. Such a retreat would confirm the accusation that COSATU and its affiliates represent a selfish elite.

The issue is therefore not that of disengaging from the various institutions and different levels at which COSATU intervenes. The issue is what to prioritise

and how to use these different levels of engagement in a strategic manner.

In a recent interview, COSATU's acting general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, admitted COSATU's weakness when it came to campaigns. The following picture emerges when assessing the campaigns (adopted at the 1998 Central Committee) on demutualisation, high interest rates, privatisation of municipal services and the ESKOM Amendment Bill:

- an imbalance between mass campaigning and negotiations;
- an over-reliance on the institutions open to labour rather than relying on mass struggle;
- an inability to ensure proper co-ordination of the different forms of engagement;
- a lack of canvassing membership views when formulating positions;
- little education of members on actual positions.

COSATU is not using the resources it has at its disposal strategically. While it has spoken about training leadership to deal with sub-national levels of government, it has not launched a thorough training programme. It has also not tapped the fact that in many governing bodies of township schools, one is bound to find a COSATU shopsteward. It has not used these shopstewards as soldiers in its campaign to transform the education system.

To emerge as a strong force in the coming period and to deal with the challenges it faces, COSATU must develop a multi-pronged strategy of intervention with a clear understanding of the strengths and resilience of certain weapons in its armoury. ★

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