

Keeping Left

View of Cosatu Central Committee

The Cosatu Central Committee (CC) met at the end of June to check the pulse of South Africa's national democratic revolution and its developmental path. **Elijah Chiwota** writes on what keeps the trade union federation to the Left.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions' (Cosatu) 5th central committee (CC) in Midrand (27 to 30 June) was a sea of red. Union leaders dressed in red shirts, t-shirts, berets, jackets, scarfs and beanies met to discuss issues affecting the country's workers.

Then there were posters and banners. A red banner even had an image of Karl Marx on it. Bunches of flowers on display at the stage also had touches of red – the favoured colour of the Left.

This being the first CC that I attended, a number of issues caught my attention and several questions arose in my mind. What made the South African trade unions maintain their socialist outlook? What kind of issues was Cosatu struggling against and what were its concerns? What kinds of socio-economic and political developments did it expect to see in place?

By reading the documents that were circulated at the CC, the Leftist shades were clear. For example, Cosatu followed a long-standing socialist tradition of building international solidarity with workers in Africa and the world.

'Our internationalism recognises our interrelatedness on the continent and globally and compels us to be in solidarity with the struggle of other people suffering from different forms of oppression.'

Unlike other countries where neo-liberals celebrated the collapse of the Soviet Union type of socialism, in South Africa it was a different story. To begin with, the labour movement never supported the capitalist system. Instead it remained committed to socialism.

So the Cosatu federation always stood against the neo-liberal economic model. Therefore, it did not support capitalist policies such as trade liberalisation, privatisation and economic partnership agreements, among others.

These policies were part of the neo-liberal model that was supported by international finance institutions (World Bank, International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation). This model did not support working-class interests.

With probably only the exception of Latin America, talk of socialism met with much scorn after the end of the Soviet Union. For example, the Left in Europe lost some of its influence and became fringe groups. Some radicals moved into mainstream political organisations. Others into early retirement.

AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

In Africa the same story repeated itself. Former allies of the Soviet Union were forced to democratise political power. These experimented with their own forms of socialism

and there were many versions such as that of first Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania had *Ujamaa*. In Zambia, President Kenneth Kaunda had *humanism*.

Other Soviet supporters included Angola and Mozambique. However, some countries that did not democratise either lost power in elections, were forced to open up spaces to allow for other political players to contest, or sank into dictatorship.

Repressive one-party state regimes that labelled themselves 'revolutionary' were common in the post-colonial landscape. They often opposed trade union movements and argued that they represented worker interests.

When the ruling parties failed to get their own people into the trade unions they found other ways of weakening them such as through undemocratic laws. Some of the laws made it illegal for workers to go on strike. If workers went on strike, they broke the law and were arrested.

The other strategy was to declare most industries 'essential'. So going on strike became difficult because the requirements were too many. In some instances the trade unions and workers simply gave up the near impossible task of collective job action or faced the anger of those in power.



William Matlala

Singing with a passion at the CC.

But Cosatu's experience is a different one to that of most African countries as it was part of the Alliance (Cosatu/African National Congress/South African Communist Party) that led to the end of the apartheid regime. It is also part of the transformation that happened after democracy in 1994.

South Africa, it seems, has kept a beacon of hope for a socialist revolution. But even though this is the case, it is far from achieving this important goal.

Unlike in most African countries where trade unions have been weakened by the state or by lack of funding, Cosatu remains strong. It retains its autonomy regarding the state and defends its position against a neo-liberal attack as seen at the CC.

With over two million members, Cosatu is the second largest trade union federation after the Nigerian Labour Congress, which claims three million members.

TENSIONS IN ALLIANCE

The CC is the decision-making body between congresses. However, it does not make policies as this is done by the Congress. The CC's main role is to review progress in the implementing of existing policies. It also sends messages to the leadership on lack of sufficient progress.

In the event that implementation was made impossible by other

socio-economic developments it is the duty of the CC to inform the congress about this.

During the CC the group discussions that happened in the commissions were presented to the plenary for debates before being passed as resolutions.

One of the delegates told me that the discussions were not new. But this is not an error. It is supposed to be that way. As a decision-making body between congresses, the CC's role was to review discussions and take stock of the federation's activities.

The CC reminded me that the debate for socialism is alive in the country and forms part of the ruling Alliance. Discussing socialism did not take place in small meetings but in big open meetings.

Because of the Alliance, Cosatu is not an ordinary trade union federation. However, this makes the stakes higher. As a powerful federation it is probably one of the few federations on the continent, if not in the world, whose contributions are sometimes adopted as government policy. In some cases when Cosatu speaks government listens. Elsewhere unions are not as powerful.

However, this relationship is far from being a romance. When Cosatu and its Alliance partners are at each other's throats, which happens

often, one doubts that they will talk together and be arm-in-arm the following day.

The Alliance partners are really strange bedfellows who will expose the other at the slightest provocation. But this ever-present tension sometimes gives the impression of a pending divorce. But this did not happen at the congress. The tension, it seems, is part of the relationship.

As a way of advancing their socialist approach, the labour federation is clear about what they want the government to deliver. Their demands are for the creation of an 'interventionist developmental state' that will lead social and economic development.

This state goes beyond guaranteeing human rights but to social and economic rights. These include rights to decent work, housing, food, health and education. Besides democratic elections, this state promotes citizen participation in development and governance processes. It also supports economic growth and transforms the economic base so as to create jobs and sustainable livelihoods for workers.

RISING UNEMPLOYMENT

Over a million workers lost their jobs in 2010 whilst seven million require jobs. This huge



unemployment and loss of income leads to poverty. Furthermore, the income differences between the high and low paid worsens the situation.

Therefore, it came as no surprise when the CC said unemployment, poverty and inequality had reached crisis levels. This 'triple crisis' has to be resolved for the country to continue on a developmental path.

The Socio-Economic Commission, which conducted discussions on this issue, suggested that big state projects in rural areas such as the building of schools and expanding the public works programmes could create jobs. A committed public service and 'progressive' committees and commissions were other options that could be followed.

Progressives were preferred because they knew the worker issues that were on the agenda. They also represented workers better.

NHI CAMPAIGN

Other resolutions adopted at the CC included a national health insurance (NHI), a living wage, and better governance at local government level, among others. These issues were a common thread that knitted most of the discussions together.

Guest speaker, minister of Health Aaron Motsoaledi, who spoke on the need for a NHI touched on a topic that the unions were passionate about. Clearly, common ground exists between Cosatu and the government on this issue.

As the cost of private health care is expensive, the approach is to strengthen public health institutions. Strategies also have to be implemented for prevention and treatment as part of the response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. One of the strategies that government is implementing includes male circumcision, promoting safer sex for young people, reducing mother-to-child transmission, and improving access to treatment.

Other calls were for strengthening the primary health care system so as to build a healthy nation.

In its resolution Cosatu preferred financing of NHI that did not involve the private medical aid schemes. It also supported a position where the scheme was run by the state and not outsourced through tenders or public private partnerships. The tender process is generally seen as a mechanism for some individuals to make money at the expense of society.

LIVING WAGE CAMPAIGN

One of the first words I learnt on the public taxis in Johannesburg is *umbolo* (pay in IsiZulu). Workers talk about it all the time on their way to and from work. This is the case because most workers struggle to meet their basic needs. What they earn is just not enough.

The strike organised by the National Union of Mineworkers in early July had the living wage as part of the demands.

Of the resolutions that were discussed the one on the living wage touched on the heart of the matter on sustainable livelihoods for workers. The CC felt that the living wage needed to be 'located within the context of the broader struggle for decent work, which in turn needs to be linked to our fundamental struggle for socialism.'

The context was important in understanding what was happening. 'Capitalism continues to restructure the working class through casualisation, outsourcing and the use of labour brokers, as it seeks to restore profitability in the wake of the global economic crisis.'

Labour brokers are seen as threatening living wages. They

are a stumbling block to getting a decent wage. At the CC there was one chorus on the brokers: to ban them. 'Voetsak labour brokers,' said a delegate from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa. The CC demanded that the issue of the banning of labour brokers be discussed in the current session of parliament. The existence of the brokers made asking for a living wage senseless.

On top of that the living wage was discussed together with other issues. The living wage was part of a 'radical socio-economic transformation that tackles the continued capitalist ownership and control of the means of production, as a basis for a genuinely progressive developmental path.'

Therefore, the living wage has to address the issues of 'socialist consciousness of the working class as a whole and to reclaim the surplus value that has been produced by labour.' The issue of surplus value has been one of socialism's demands for a long time. It is one of the sites where workers have struggled with capitalism. Capital surplus value is where profit comes from.

The living wage demands also included adequate and affordable food, quality housing closer to workplaces, efficient public transport, health care, education and basic services.

The issue of migrant workers from neighbouring countries accepting to work for less than local people was also mentioned in the discussion.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT DEBATE

On local government, the resolution urged workers to support the ANC and the principles of the Freedom Charter.

Corruption must also be dealt with and campaigns waged against the Protection of Information Bill. The Bill was seen as blocking efforts against corrupt activities.

On local elections one of the resolutions dealt with problems that were inherited from the apartheid regime. For example, a balance had to be struck on land use.

'That municipalities and the state in general must stop the sale of state-owned land, expropriate privately-owned land and strike a balance between the use of land for social development and production purposes.'

The municipalities were also advised to stop outsourcing their services. 'All municipalities must stop outsourcing services and making use of labour brokers. As part of addressing the apartheid fault lines, the state must deliver



services directly, thus making the state more accountable and creating local jobs.'

The CC also called for citizen participation in local government so as to deal with contentious issues such as the selection of candidates to be elected as ward councillors. 'Locals must have an interest in building strong ward committees through direct participation but also raising community awareness about ward committees.'

This is in line with thinking by scholars on how local government can be improved. John Gaventa puts it this way: 'Rebuilding relationships between citizens and their local government means working both

sides of the equation - that is, going beyond "civil society" or "state-based" approaches, to focus on their intersection, through new forms of participation, responsiveness and accountability.'

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to use the argument of decolonising 'the lifeworld' by J Habermas. 'The lifeworld' refers to civic space and everyday life. In the context of the CC the workers' lifeworld includes the workplace.

It is this lifeworld that is being colonised by the 'system world' (government and market forces). So the resistance as shown by the

language of the resolutions is to be expected.

The system world is dominated by neo-liberal economic policies and Cosatu is one of several organisations that are part of the anti-globalisation movement. This movement's goal is to decolonise the world from dominance by market forces.

Hopefully the resolutions will not be paper tigers that snarl but with no bite and not create apathy among workers, as put by one delegate who said the arguments at the CC were anything but new. I suppose what then becomes the issue is to put the words into action. ■