

Marginalised labour

Route to social movement unionism?

Cosatu has long stated its aim of organising marginalised workers.

Ercument Çelik argues that the World Class Cities for All campaign provides an ideal opportunity for Cosatu to do this while at the same time forging links with social movements and other organisations of the poor.

In South Africa there is much discussion on the rise of marginalised labour and its growing reaction to exclusion from the post-apartheid democracy. Trade unions of course are at the centre of these debates.

In the last ten years Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) has declared its intention to organise marginalised labour. In 1997, Cosatu's September Commission recommended that the federation commit itself to organising informal workers and begin a process of interacting with existing organisations in the informal economy.



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In 1998 it launched the 'Autumn Offensive' to organise the unorganised. However, the campaign did not target vulnerable workers, but instead unorganised core workers. Cosatu's 2000 national congress identified the recruitment and organising of informal and atypical workers as a major and necessary challenge. It committed each affiliate to developing a strategy for recruitment of these workers.

In 2005, Cosatu held the Informal Economy Organising Workshop with the participation of some affiliates, Streetnet International and researchers and former leadership of the Self-Employed Women's Union (Sewu). It proposed that a project should be established to work towards a new union for informal workers to be launched in June 2006. But nothing happened on that date. It was thought that an informal workers' union should be an associate rather than an affiliate of Cosatu. The federation does not organise workers into general union structures so it was felt that it should consist of a particular section of the

informal economy - street vendors. The issue is how to find the best way for such a union to fit into Cosatu structures.

WCCA CAMPAIGN

In March 2007, 25 organisations representing street vendors, shack dwellers, sex workers, landless people and other organisations of the urban poor, trade unions (Cosatu, South African Municipal Workers Union and the Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union) and the SA Communist Party joined forces at a World Class Cities for All (WCCA) campaign national meeting.

Organising under the slogan "nothing for us without us!" they challenged the traditional approach to building 'World Class Cities' and created a new, more inclusive concept of "World Class Cities for All". This included the participation of street vendors and other groups of the urban poor in preparations for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. They challenged the authorities to create alternatives to current practices of evicting street vendors and clearing

slums where the urban poor lose both their livelihoods and homes.

The campaign made the important step of submitting an application to become part of the community constituency of Nedlac (National Economic Development Labour Council). It is engaging in discussions in the Council to develop a 2010 Framework Agreement.

At Nedlac the question has often been asked as to whether the community constituency is the equivalent social dialogue institution to labour and business that are structured to engage in a dialogue process. It is argued that a range of organisations are not represented by the current community constituency. Street vendors, for example, and the marginalised have poor or no representation. There are also problems among the marginalised groups and organisations/movements that represent them.

Despite informal workers and their organisations attempting to bridge the gap between unions and social movements through the WCCA, Cosatu still has no clear policy on organising or building an alliance with them. While informal workers are excluded from social movements as well as from the labour movement, the WCCA has brought renewed optimism for the protection of informal workers' rights.

So far the WCCA campaign has been a joint effort of various organisations and social movements of the marginalised - one united voice spelling out a common goal. The campaign meeting was not plagued by infighting that is often the case in similar campaigns. This unity is likely to remain in Nedlac's community constituency thanks to the WCCA campaign.

Moreover, the platform created by the campaign has initiated constructive dialogue between trade unions and social movements. This is important in the South African context. Social movement unionism covers the interests of the broad working class unlike narrow trade unionism, which concerns itself only with the working class in their place of work. Previously, Cosatu unions had struggled against apartheid in alliance with community organisations, or in other words, social movements. But today it is questionable whether unions are still committed to this perspective.

Many criticise unions for becoming distant from communities and their needs. However, the WCCA campaign could be an agent for uniting these forces of the working class and poor. Unions can harmonise the struggle of vulnerable and informal workers and social movements with their own agenda. Importantly, there is evidence

that street vendors and their organisations can act as a bridge between social movements and unions.

Informal workers are creating a new social movement themselves - being both the poor as well as the most vulnerable class of workers. Their vulnerability brings their demands close to those of other social movements. They are both at the workplace and in the community. Trade unions should use this chance to combine their agendas on organising marginalised labour and develop a more meaningful social movement culture. Furthermore, as informal worker organisations see themselves as part of the labour movement, their existence in Nedlac may lend more power to decisions in favour of the entire labour movement.

Isn't it time to put social movement unionism into practice? LB

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