

Marikana & end of honeymoon: thinking time for unions

In this second part of the interview **Tinyiko Sam Maluleke** recently appointed Deputy Vice Chancellor: Internationalisation, Advancement and Student Affairs at the University of Johannesburg talks about problems facing trade unions and how these were exposed at Marikana such as failing to service members, upward mobility, affiliate politics and dynamics of the tripartite Alliance of the African National Congress, Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). **Musawenkosi Malabela** continues the interview which was first run in the March/April issue.

MM: What does Marikana mean for unions and what should they do moving forward?

TSM: In some ways unions are victims of their own success. They have been very successful and too powerful in the past few years. The list of industrial and labour policy achievements of South African trade unions since 1994 is staggering. I recall some of the pre-1994 challenges facing trade unions as recalled by Ms Emma Mashinini (one of the founders of Cosatu) in a recent acceptance speech for an honorary doctoral degree at the University of South Africa. The battle for something as basic as union recognition was a long-drawn-out one in many sectors.

As they say, nothing succeeds like success. Workers are asking for more from the unions because they know what unions can achieve, and what they have been able to achieve until now. There is a sense in which two decades of

achievement and growth may have led many unions to complacency. Without them realising it, a gap may have been growing between them and their members. Allegations are widespread that union leaders have become too close to management, especially in the mining sector.

Another complicating factor is that some unions have invested very well over the past two decades with the result that they have become wealthy. This was wise and it has saved trade unions from being perpetual beggars of foreign funding. But the contrast between the wealth of unions and the poverty of their members – often reflected in the types of office occupied, salaries and perks received by their leaders – has become more pronounced in recent years.

Yet another difficult factor has been the Alliance relationship between Cosatu and the ruling party. This was a useful as well as

a politically brilliant decision – at least at the time when it was made. There is no doubt that this arrangement has benefited the workers as it has meant that their concerns have been firmly placed on the agenda of government.

However, in recent years, some workers have been feeling that this relationship has not been of much benefit to them. Some have started questioning the benefits and usefulness of the Alliance partnership for workers. Have the workers remained central to the mandate and mission of trade unions and their Alliance partners? Have the workers become the forgotten factor in alliance relations? What are unions for if not for workers?

My sense is that the Cosatu strategy of alliance with the ruling party and massive investments to secure financial stability and a future for itself and its member unions has yielded great results until now. However, the time may



have come for Cosatu to reconsider and redraft its basic strategies in light of current developments in the land. Such reconsideration may not necessarily mean a physical withdrawal from Alliance politics but certainly a tactical and ideological withdrawal from aspects of that relationship might be necessary.

The other contradiction is that if you look at what happened on top of that hill in Marikana on 16 August 2012 it was members of Cosatu who were killing each other. You had Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru) represented in the police force and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) represented in the workers. At Marikana you had members of two Alliance partners at war with one another. Admittedly some of the workers belonged to the Association of Mining and Construction Union (Amcu) while others claimed to belong to no union. The bottom line is that workers were on that hill, and workers represent Cosatu's core business.

Now how does Cosatu mediate? How does it intervene? If the federation intervenes in a particular manner Popcru would say: 'Aha... we are your members, what are you doing, you are misrepresenting us, you are attacking us'. If Cosatu intervenes and starts to say NUM ought to have done this... they can say: 'Ey... we are the biggest affiliate in Cosatu be careful of what you say about us'. If Cosatu tries to call the state to order then its Alliance partner the ANC might not take kindly to such. These are the contradictions that Cosatu has to live with. The position of Cosatu is both precarious and powerful.

MM: What can Cosatu learn from the Marikana massacre?

TSM: I think the message to Cosatu is that some of its affiliates have serious problems with their members. That all is not well in the ranks of some of the affiliates and that Cosatu cannot continue to operate under the assumption that *we are just a federation and assume that our affiliate members*

are intact, that there are no issues to be addressed, all we need to worry about is the affiliation fee and affiliates participation in our forums. Yet, this is a very difficult and sensitive thing because I assume that Cosatu cannot be seen to be interfering in the affairs of an affiliate.

For the affiliates I think it is time to return to the source and core business. I spoke about their main customer, the member and the worker. I think it is time to return to that and not to dismiss the concerns of the workers too easily. One of my fears is that there could be an exodus from NUM but I hope that this won't happen because if it is not managed very well this may be the case. You could see rival unions such as Amcu becoming majority unions in places where they were never majorities. To deal with that you can't just stop workers from deciding which union to join. You have to convince them that you have something to offer and Cosatu and its affiliates have got a long history which they can build on. In part, Amcu is a result of



Workers celebrate May Day in Sharpeville but unions must do more to keep them happy.

disagreements and failures within the NUM.

I also think that we need a little bit more sympathy or empathy from Cosatu than what we have seen in Marikana. For a trade union federation that has been at the fore-front of e-tolls, service delivery protests, and all sorts of national issues it was quite amazing to see how absent – relatively – they were in Marikana. That's the other lesson that they have to learn.

The cost of their Alliance with government is something that they would need to weigh-up: *What is the Alliance's worth?* They must do a cost-benefit analysis constantly. There is a perception that union leaders have become part of an elite. Workers become shop stewards, then office bearers, and eventually political leaders. From there they become cabinet ministers: some might even become presidents one day. In and of itself, there is nothing wrong with this progression – especially at the individual level. Problems start when this begins to feel like a structural and structured arrangement.

I pulled Sakhela Buhlungu's book on Cosatu (*A paradox of victory: Cosatu and the democratic transition in South Africa*, UKZN Press) and its relation to the ruling party out of my shelf again and looked at it after Marikana. You could have said that some of the things that Buhlungu said were exaggerated at the time they were written; about the paradox that Cosatu finds itself in. Buhlungu might not have been as far off the mark as some thought.

MM: If it is no longer a paradox what has it become?

TSM: It seems to me that we have now moved beyond Sakhela's terminology of paradox. The terms now are 'contradiction' and 'confrontation'. A paradox speaks to a 'both, and' situation but contradictions and confrontations – as we are experiencing them in the mining sector today – can take us down an economic cliff sooner rather than later.

I think there is a lot of work for trade unions to do.

MM: What do you mean by social distance?

TSM: Although there are two gaps in the country we often talk of only one: that between the rich and the poor – which is a very important root cause of not just Marikana but the service delivery protests and other industrial actions in the country. But there is another gap, which we often neglect, and it's the growing gap between leaders and their followers – between the ANC and its members, and union leaders and their members.

I think that Marikana exposes these gaps very clearly. ^{LE}

Musawenkosi Malabela is a researcher in organisational renewal with the National Labour and Economic Development Institute in Johannesburg. This is the second part of the interview with Professor Tinyiko Maluleke on the Marikana Massacre which took place in October 2012.