



In a response to Bobby Marie's article (*SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 16 No 5) on problems facing the union movement, ROB REES* argues the solution lies in more worker control and a less compromising politics.

more **Workers'** **Control** *needed*

Marie attributes the decline in attendance at shopsteward councils and other union structures, in part to the fact that they have become briefing sessions for increasingly complex issues, with a lack of participation and often simply rubber-stamping a distant national agenda. He also says that since the unbanning of the ANC there has been demobilisation. This has impacted negatively on the amount of energy that workers are prepared to put into their organisation. Among other solutions he argues for the need to give elected leadership more decision-making power within agreed policies. This approach is wrong.

This article focuses on other factors that have led to the decline in union attendance, putting far more emphasis on the *political direction* of leadership and their willingness to *support and build* struggle on the ground in

relation to both national or local issues.

There are very few examples in COSATU where its founding principle - "an injury to one is an injury to all" - has been implemented. It is general practice to prioritise other issues rather than mobilise the weight of COSATU to build and strengthen striking or dismissed workers.

The current isolation of the NEHAWU strike is a clear example. The best that COSATU can do is to offer money for bail, suggest making skilled negotiators available, and refer the matter to a public sector forum. None of these can be decisive in winning the NEHAWU strike, clearly a crucial strike to be won in this period. This pattern goes back well before the unbanning of the ANC. The Nampak strike, the 1987 miners strike, and lack of support for thousands who lost their jobs after stayaway action, are a few examples.

Similarly, COSATU has been particularly

* national organiser of PPWAWU

unsuccessful in uniting and co-ordinating affiliates around common struggles - a living wage, retrenchments or centralised bargaining. Common big bosses, owning companies that dominate whole industries, provides the structural basis for this kind of solidarity and cross-sector struggle. Instead, individual factories or sectors have been left to struggle in isolation, despite the fact that they often share the same employers (such as Anglo or Barlows) as workers in other COSATU affiliates.

This has contributed to significant defeats and demoralisation. According to the bosses, the defeat of the 1987 miners' strike laid the basis for the 'realism' of NUM's approach to struggle today - read, acceptance of low wages and the necessity to retrench. COSATU must share responsibility for allowing that defeat.

Effective solidarity is the basis of deepening working class consciousness and the cement of any socialist policies. Why, then, is the union giant unable to unite workers' struggles? Part of the reason is that the leadership does not have a clear working class orientation, a politics that says: "There's a struggle. Let us go and build it to win". Our leadership is too intent on deepening its relationship to the bosses, and finding compromises with them. The recent deal that COSATU leaders, with the support of ANC and SACP leadership, tried to get from SACCOLA, is a case in point.

The enthusiasm for the deal in the bosses newspapers was no different from the feelings expressed inside the tripartite alliance. We heard comments like, "this deal is historic, we've never pulled employers onto our side"!!! The leadership was so interested in making history, and pulling the bosses onto its side, it forgot to see what impact it was making on the ground.

The attempted deal confused the rank and file, providing space for the bosses to create division, and injecting potential for further demoralisation. The overwhelming feeling within COSATU, expressed at various regional congresses, was to reject the deal. The masses wanted action and were inspired by calls to



"bring the regime down" and for "unprecedented mass action".

In order to increase attendance, participation and creativity within the ranks of COSATU, we need much

more worker control over leadership. A leadership decision that goes against rank and file feeling is the most effective way to create apathy and demoralisation. "We discussed mass action in our structures - but leadership prefers a deal with the bosses" is a comment often heard.

If we give more decision-making power to our leadership now, we will be accepting what the bosses desperately need - a close relationship with union leadership. They need to use the authority of union leaders to reduce rank and file militancy and sabotage working class power.

The second urgent need in COSATU is to *challenge the current politics of class compromise.* This is clearly linked to the need for more worker control. Class compromise cannot survive with strong workers' control. Conversely, increasing class compromise will lead to a decline in participation and the ultimate defeat of our movement. We should not forget that bosses and workers can never be on the same side - unless workers accept the bosses' right to exploit, pay starvation wages, retrench, and attack workers.

If we could spend as much time and resources in building solidarity and working class unity as we spend in meetings with big bosses (and their government), we would strengthen consciousness and lay the basis for turning defeats into victories.

The consistent disregard of rank and file opinion; the increasing orientation with the bosses; the failure to intervene and strengthen struggles against the bosses (and their government) and their consequent defeats; the lack of a clear and simple fighting programme of action - these are the things that have led to the decline of participation in union structures. There are obvious similar trends inside the ANC. And that is the real organisational crisis in COSATU. ☆