

New social force on the march

*Cosatu has received some strong criticism around the recent anti-privatisation strike. **Eddie Webster**, who has been involved directly and indirectly with the labour movement since the 1970s provides a personal account of the events which transpired during the recent strike.*

I have been reflecting recently on the surprising twists and turns in labour's rich history. In 1932 in the United States, for example, august labour experts made solemn pronouncements heralding the death of the labour movement. The skills of craft workers were being undermined through changes in the labour market arising from the emergence of mass production. But, instead of disappearing, labour was on the eve of the most dramatic upsurge in its history. This began in 1933 with the emergence of a new form of unionism – mass production industrial unionism.

Historically, unions emerged so that workers can combine to exercise some power over their own destinies. I wrote this sentence in April 1974, along with the late Richard Turner and Alec Erwin, for the first edition of the newly launched *South African Labour Bulletin*. A year earlier strikes had broken out in the Durban-Pinetown area and we were making the case for trade unions to be extended to black workers. But while the goal of unions remains unchanged, the tactics, strategies and forms of organisation they use, change constantly.

History of stayaways

Take the tactic of the stayaway. It first



emerged in South Africa on 1 May 1950 to mark the general dissatisfaction of black people with apartheid. It was used another six times during the '50s and early '60s by the Congress Alliance. It re-emerged in 1976 during the Soweto uprisings. It was a highly successful weapon between 1984 and 1986 when there were at least 15 stayaways driven largely by labour in alliance with community organisations.

Stayaways, or general strikes as they are called elsewhere, are not levers to introduce social revolution. The general strike demonstrates the power of the masses to withdraw their labour and therefore the dependency of the system upon them. It assumes particular significance in those societies, such as apartheid South Africa, where workers do not have political rights. Of course, the stayaway tactic continues to be used

during the post-apartheid period, especially since the stalemate inside the alliance over economic policy. Indeed Cosatu has called for a stayaway every year since 1999 over its opposition to privatisation.

A surprisingly large number of workers responded to Cosatu's call on 1 and 2 October. This is in spite of the 'no work no pay' policy pursued by employers, the very high unemployment rate, and a virtually unanimous propaganda campaign against the stayaway from government and the media. In fact business estimated that as many as 15% workers nationwide stayed away and some workplaces, such as the Durban docks and auto plants, closed down completely.

Significance of action

But to focus on the number of workers who stayed away is to miss the significance of the event, especially since no independent source monitored it. What took place on 2 October was a highly visible demonstration of anger by a new social force in post-apartheid South Africa, the politically enfranchised working poor. In Johannesburg at least 40 000 people walked for six hours from the library lawns, down Jeppe Street and back, to deliver a petition to the premier of Gauteng Sam Shilowa.

Why is this significant? Clearly it cannot be compared to the millions who stayed at home during the apartheid period! What is new is that democracy has constitutionalised the rights of workers; they have the right to strike, to march and, more importantly, they have the right to vote at the local, provincial and national level. Seldom has the political discourse of government shifted so quickly to defend the rights of the poor as it did in the week before, during and after the October stayaways!

But a democratic South Africa requires a more nuanced use of power

than the constant use of the stayaway tactic. Union organisers can no longer take for granted that workers will follow their calls. Under apartheid race and class virtually coincided and the apartheid state was illegitimate. Today's ruling party is in alliance with Cosatu and action against it cannot have the same meaning as it did under apartheid. Organisers have now to win the voluntary consent of their members and the public. This requires the active mobilisation of members in imaginative ways, not simply an absence from work, especially when this absence could result in a loss of the week's grocery money!

There is no doubt that Cosatu struck the right cord when it raised demands around access to water, electricity, housing, schooling, health, and sanitation. The men and women who marched down Jeppe Street were not 'ultra leftists', if by this is meant that they hold unrealistic views on the possibility of transformation. They are raising the kinds of demands that organised labour has won in social democracies elsewhere in the world. From surveys I conducted in 1994 and 1999 among ordinary Cosatu members they are aware of the improvements in water, electricity and telephones that some have benefited from. They also acknowledge the constraints that the government is under in the era of globalisation.

The vast bulk of participants on the march were working men and women in their '30s, '40s and '50s. I spoke to some of them. They are struggling to survive even though some of them have stable jobs. Others have casual jobs, or jobs that have been outsourced and they now earn less than R1 000 a month. These are no labour aristocrats. They are the beginnings of a poor people's movement. Who will lead them is not yet clear. What is clear is that by giving this

new social force the vote – political citizenship – without income security, access to basic services and a safe environment – social citizenship – they have been given a legitimate cause and a new weapon.

Work restructuring is not simply leading to a loss of formal employment; the employment relationship itself is changing. Roughly one third of South Africa's working population is now employed in the informal sector. There is a sense in which union leaders are realising the limitations in their responses to the new work order and are searching for new responses. Surely new models of unionism will have to be invented, models appropriate for a mobile, service-oriented, and knowledge-based economy in which women and immigrants are rapidly increasing. New allies will have to be sought among the social movements emerging in the townships of South Africa, such as the Treatment Action Committee (TAC) and the Landless People's Movement (LPM).

It would be a pity if, like the misguided experts in the US in 1932, government and labour were so concerned with attacking or defending an overused tactic that they did not recognise the significance of the 'failed' October stayaway. The implications are clear; it is time for new tactics, new forms of organisation and a renegotiation of the alliance.

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