

preparing *for the* future

Is the era of conflict being replaced by a new era of co-operation? How is the character of trade unionism changing? SARHWU's education officer VANGUARD MKHOSANA discusses the dangers.

The trade union movement in South Africa – especially COSATU – is a force that cannot be ignored. However, to meet the expectations of our people the trade union movement needs to assess its strengths and weaknesses in order to shape itself for the challenges ahead.

A number of new challenges are emerging to confront the labour movement.

Firstly, the trade unions are beginning to participate in tripartite agreements and forums. Secondly, there are a range of managerial innovations at whose centre is the 'team concept'. Thirdly, there is an increase in full-time shopstewards. Finally, there are new problems in the relation between intellectuals and workers, and in connection with internationalisation and self sufficiency.

Tripartism refers to a system of institutions and agreements which involve three parties: capital, labour and the state. An example would be the restructured National Manpower Commission (NMC). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) is the chief advocate of tripartite institutions. In its structure the ILO accommodates labour, employers and governments. ILO sets labour standards in the

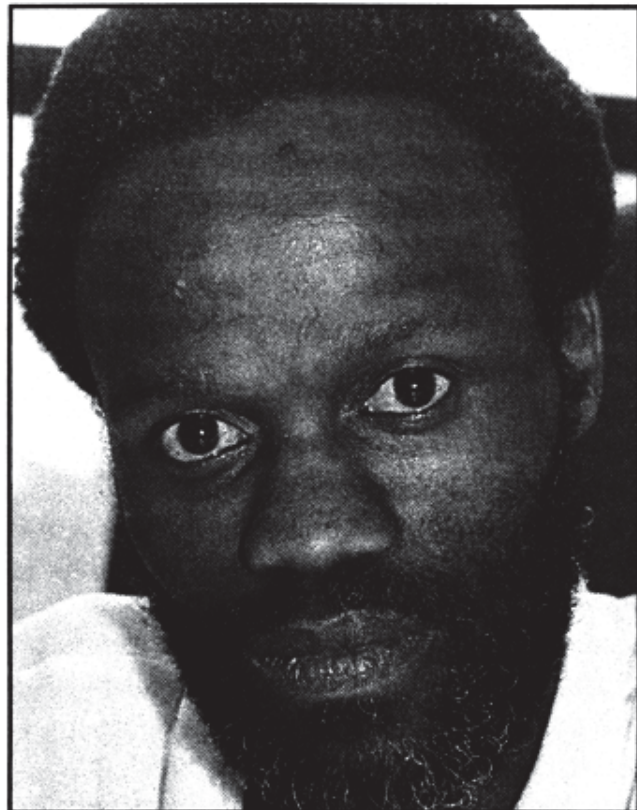


Photo: William Matlala

form of conventions. South Africa left ILO in 1964 and is not a signatory to most of those ILO conventions. However, COSATU and NACTU have observer's status in ILO annual meetings.

New era of co-operation?

Apartheid mistrust has made the ILO's concept of tripartite co-operation well nigh impossible in South Africa. However, recently there has been a greater degree of involvement by labour in government institutions like the NMC and the National Training Board, and a demand for inclusion in structures like CODESA.

At the same time COSATU has engaged the employer body SACCOLA in various discussions (rewriting the LRA, creating the National Economics Negotiations Forum and the pre-stayaway talks of early August). Increased discussions on both government-employer fronts is likely to continue.

Tripartite engagement introduces a new culture in the present generation of unions and therefore cannot go unchallenged.

Tripartism is capable of serving as a 'taming ground' for trade unions. At this stage we should guard against our 'involvement card' changing into a 'collaboration card' because that would prolong the lifespan of apartheid. Which does not mean COSATU should stand aside and watch disinterestedly from afar. It is important to stay close to the membership and be guided by their views in every step taken.

Managerial innovations

Recent managerial innovations like employee share ownership, quality circles and 'worker participation' have also created a lot of debate.

The main focus of these innovations is productivity and involvement of workers in running the company. While these innovations are not yet common they will spread, and it is important to debate them now. They do of course raise the question of workers' control.

In discussing what workers' control entails, we need to ask ourselves many questions. Should workers co-operate with bosses in participatory management? Should we build co-operatives controlled by workers? Should we create work groups which would run parallel to management structures, control day-to-day work and get management to disclose their plans about the company? Or should we gear ourselves for the painstaking

long road towards scientific socialism in order to realise real workers' control?

To me it seems there is no short cut; as workers we should put our weight behind the forces fighting for socialism. However, it is important to improve our conditions now. The development of leadership skills in worker leadership and the all-round upgrading of the membership are both matters to be considered.

Fulltime shopstewards

The development of industrial relations has established a working relationship between unions and employers. This has led to a new 'category' of worker - the fulltime shopsteward - paid for by management and given company facilities and resources.

The unions benefit by getting shopstewards to service workers at no cost to the union. On the other side is the possibility of blackmail of the shopstewards by managements and their inability to operate independently of management - as can organisers. Also such shopstewards run the risk of losing touch with factory floor conditions. These weaknesses may, over time, weaken the union against the employer.

The system has so far only been put into operation within a few unions like NUM and NUMSA. We need to study the system carefully.

The role of intellectuals and officials

Increasingly, there is a need for sophistication within unions. Union personnel need to be able to represent workers in disciplinary hearings and arbitrations, they must be capable negotiators in collective bargaining, skilled administrators and so on.

But there is a fear that the flooding of unions with skilled personnel could mean many unskilled but experienced union staff losing their jobs; and also that intellectuals will dominate the decision-making processes.

The situation calls for the upgrading and training of union staff and members and the creating of mechanisms to guard against the domination of union members by intellectuals.

In theory, COSATU's principle of workers'



Need to rethink internationalism: NUMSA president Mtutuzeli Tom meets Brazilian counterpart Guiba Navarro in Sao Paulo

Photo: Karl von Holdt

control should curb intellectual domination. In practice, workers' control does not seem to go beyond getting a worker to chair meetings. Then union officials start to put forward their views articulately which influence the decisions. We need to get beyond sloganeering about workers' control. Already there are tensions between union employees and union members. At the same time, the role of intellectuals in the unions should be defined so they do not feel alienated.

Another matter for concern in the labour movement is discrimination.

Affirmative action for both black workers and women workers must similarly go beyond a declaration of intent. Every union ascribing to gender equality must consciously pursue some stated goals. Those unions that do not upgrade women should be held to account. By discriminating against women we deprive the working class of a powerful force.

Internationalism and self sufficiency

Democracy is not God-given. Conditions must be created for democracy to thrive and be self-generating. Central to this is the ability of the organisation to maintain itself. This saves

the organisation from the risk of outside control. We need to keep in mind that he who pays the piper chooses the tune. Perhaps we need to look at working class solidarity and see how it relates to the question of self sufficiency.

Since the growth of capital into an international force it became necessary to have internationalism and working class solidarity as an equally viable force.

Solidarity means mutual help among the workers industrially, nationally and internationally. Yet judging our unions (mainly in COSATU and NACTU) by our practices, it would seem we understand workers' solidarity to mean receiving material handouts from others.

One historic example of solidarity was COSATU's support and help to the workers and the people of Namibia in preparation for their first elections. But that was exceptional. Otherwise solidarity mainly takes the form of receiving funds from international trade union centres and individual unions abroad. Almost all COSATU affiliates receive such grants. This cannot go on indefinitely without undermining COSATU's independence.

The dying of apartheid makes it imperative

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that we prepare ourselves for the post-apartheid period. We cannot expect COSATU to enter the world as an equal if it cannot run itself.

Foreign funding benefitted COSATU a lot. We managed to build a strong federation with viable structures which make it possible to consult membership and account on all matters of importance.

However, we would be lacking in self-criticism if we were to say foreign funding is without its problems.

- First, a new culture of using posh hotels for trade union meetings has taken over the use of poor people's places like churches and community halls.
- Second, the availability of funds has elevated the holding of meetings to the level of a struggle in itself. Many top trade unionists appear to spend the better part of their time in meetings.
- Third, innumerable task forces, commissions and special committees are created daily, sometimes with ill-defined scope. In some cases such task forces have taken decisions, thus reducing the leadership to mere rubber-stamps.
- Fourth, pre-occupation with meetings has reduced trade unionism to a near-academic exercise characterised by the use of flamboyant English; this alienates workers. An elite within the labour movement gets room to manoeuvre.
- Fifth, there is limited time to spend servicing workers on the ground. We are gradually surrendering workers' militancy to the tower of legalism in a situation (apartheid) which does not fully warrant it. Big sums of money come from abroad for legal bills. In the beginning unions used foreign funding for the services rendered by the lawyers who were the custodians of these funds. Now these legal bills must be paid directly from union coffers. Unions are now trapped between legalism, lack of funds and diminishing militancy.
- Sixth, the 1991 International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) conference in Gaborone showed how our poverty can

be used to blackmail us. ICFTU was accused of using this platform to campaign for new affiliates and to condone rather than to condemn the International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment programmes which have been disastrous for workers and paralysed unions throughout Southern Africa. ICFTU General Secretary Enzo Frisco went on to say: "It would be difficult in the future to co-operate with organisations who discriminate against affiliates of the ICFTU ... these are not empty words." This should not be construed to mean that foreign funding is by its nature evil but it does highlight our vulnerability.

We must familiarise ourselves with internal fund raising methods and aim at self-sufficiency.

In conclusion, it is clear the challenges confronting the trade union movement are becoming more complex.

As unions, we need to forge stronger solidarity links at national and international levels and develop the necessary skills in our cadres so that the unions will be able to face these challenges. ☆

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