

Reply to 'FEDUSA and COSATU: different unionism or different tactics?'

In the June edition of the *Labour Bulletin*, Etienne Vlok, presented a summary of the types of unionism practised by COSATU and FEDUSA. His final conclusion was that FEDUSA practised business unionism whereas COSATU, a proponent of social movement unionism in the past had now embraced strategic unionism, with an occasional reversion to their previous more activist and confrontational position.

For many readers of the *Bulletin*, Vlok's article confirms long-held stereotypes: COSATU is left wing, FEDUSA is conservative. Nothing new. But there is a bit more to this story. Both federations are undergoing important changes which need to be noted by those who see the advance of the labour movement as central to social transformation in South Africa.

Differences

To begin with, we must acknowledge that COSATU remains by far the most powerful federation in the country. Their capacity to mobilise as well as to respond on broader political and policy issues remains unchallenged. While the article makes this point clear, Vlok fails to address the diversity and change within FEDUSA.

There are key undercurrents not captured by the interview with General Secretary Chez Milani. An important starting point is that FEDUSA is a much looser federation than COSATU. As an organisation, FEDUSA:

John Pape replies to an article published in Labour Bulletin vol 24 no 3 and argues that complexities in COSATU and FEDUSA's strategies make categorising their type of unionism difficult.

- passes few resolutions and policies;
- does not have a tradition of mandates;
- does not even elect most of its top leadership – they are appointees.

In one sense this is an organisational weakness. But in another way, the loose structure provides considerable space for a range of positions on key worker issues. Hence, while Milani may argue that Maslow's self-actualisation is the ideological inspiration of the federation, I have never seen or heard a single reference to Maslow in any of the large number of workshops I have facilitated for FEDUSA and its affiliates. I have heard a lot of terminology used by trade unionists world wide: 'working class power', 'taking on the bosses', 'advancing the interests of workers'. In some discussions, certain FEDUSA members, albeit a few, have unashamedly called themselves socialists and talked about the need for 'worker control' (not participation) and 'ownership of the means of production'.

FEDUSA

Central to the notion of a changing FEDUSA is the issue of race. The power base of the first generation of FEDUSA leadership was historically white unions – predominantly artisans, nearly all male. Some were dedicated trade unionists, but raised in the ideology of apartheid and groomed to become a white labour aristocracy. While many of these elements have become genuine democrats in a democratic South Africa, undertones of the past remain. It is, however, a past being shaken by public sector restructuring. Many of FEDUSA's white members are based in the parastatal mega-enterprises: Transnet, Eskom, and Telkom. Their jobs and their influence within the federation have a very short shelf life. Thousands will be taking the package or simply be sacked in the impending wave of retrenchments.

Black workers in the public and manufacturing sectors are the rising force in the federation. Many of them have spearheaded noticeable changes in FEDUSA in the last couple of years, including the unprecedented solidarity with COSATU during the public sector strikes of 1999. This new layer of leadership in FEDUSA, while not socialist, is a distinct break with the past. Most of them reject the notion of FEDUSA as an 'apolitical' force. Many vote for the ANC. Still others look for an independent working class alternative.

COSATU

By the same token, as Vlok has pointed out, the COSATU of the new millennium is not the same force which we knew in 1985. Of course, it could not be any different. We now face new forces and problems: globalisation and unexpected anti-labour twists by the democratic government. But at the same time, the political dispensation has opened up a range of 'strategic unionism' opportunities

which did not previously exist. But devoting more resources to 'strategic' efforts runs the risk of building a politics of its own. The negotiated approach can become an end, rather than a means.

Coexisting with this strategic unionism is also a strain of business unionism, as manifested in the many investment companies in the federation. In this sphere of business unionism, COSATU, not FEDUSA is the leader.

Nonetheless, COSATU is far from being a moderate federation. More than any other social force, COSATU has been in the streets contesting the implementation of neo-liberalism. As Vlok noted, COSATU's practice still includes a wide variety of mass action – such as the 10 May stayaway on the employment issue. The new attempt to revise the labour laws will no doubt spark more waves of militant mobilisation. The recent review of labour legislation has sparked unprecedented anger and outrage. The rise of alternative candidates in recent affiliate congress elections reflect the contestation of strategic and business unionism tendencies within COSATU. All of this does not fit tightly into one model.

Focus on joint action

Maybe then, Vlok's usage of different ideologies based on the past is freezing us in time. Perhaps we need not focus so much on the different models of unionism practised by the federations. Instead let us examine the potential for Gear and privatisation to drive COSATU and FEDUSA into more joint actions like the public sector strikes and the anti-Goli campaign. From such struggles new models and organisational forms of unionism may emerge. Ultimately these models may not look exactly like any of those noted by Vlok. ★

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