

Restructuring in the public service: *a COSATU perspective*

By PHILLIP DEXTER *



Introduction

The South African public service is perhaps one of the most important spheres of political, social and economic activity in the country. The government, through the public service, employs 1,1 million workers, around 8,5% of the economically active population. These workers are the employees that deliver services in the various government departments, from the provinces to the police force, and from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Foreign Affairs. The

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apartheid regime has huge resources at its direct disposal, including the potential to use those resources in the future.

Once the exclusive domain of conservative, white males, the public service is now on the threshold of an important and radical transformation process. The Interim Constitution and the ANC's proposed Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) hold out the promise of substantial change. The extent to which this is realised in practice will be influenced by the role that labour, and in particular COSATU as the largest union federation, will play in this process. The federation's role will also determine to what extent the changes that are bound to follow are in the interests of the workers in the public service.

History

After its successful election campaign of 1948, the National Party skilfully continued a twisted 'affirmative action' programme begun earlier in the century. 'Poor Whites', as the white working class was known, were given jobs in a rapidly growing public service, which included the state administration, health, education and railway transport services. The effect of this labour preference policy has been to create a public service with enormous structural problems, including large numbers of executive managers (from

Deputy Director to Director-General) who have been promoted through the ranks on the basis of allegiance to successive apartheid governments, rather than any real competence to manage public services efficiently and effectively. At a recent meeting, a state department official was asked why South Africa was the only country in the world which penalised workers for late application for a benefit to which they had contributed. His answer: "Because it's in the legislation"!

The apartheid policy of creating bantustans, "own affairs" and the tricameral system, has added to the complexity of the problems in the public service. While almost half the public servants in South African are black, such statistics, often bandied about by the regime, are misleading because black people in the public service are confined to the lower grades or to bantustan public services.

Bad government, which has used state resources for party political purposes, namely the implementation of apartheid, has resulted in a system where the allocation of resources is irrational and quite wasteful in economic terms. Duplication of services, inferior services and the extent of corruption and mismanagement is severely underestimated. The apartheid public service has created institutions and personnel that are accountable to no one but their superiors, unrepresentative of the South African population and unresponsive to the needs South Africans and in particular of the black community.

Workers in the public service

Not only are most black workers in the lower grades, but most services set up exclusively for black communities are under the control of white managers. This means that even in institutions established to provide services to the black majority, there exists a culture of apathy on the part of management, and a degree of alienation on the part of workers that has important

consequences for the recipients of these services. More often than not, when workers are aggrieved by the actions of white managers, it is black people that bear the brunt of the industrial action that follows.

The enormous differentials in salaries and conditions of service make the public service a volatile industrial relations arena, as is witnessed by the high levels of industrial action. A general assistant in the public service earns about R9 000 per annum with no housing subsidy and meagre pension benefits. A Director-General earns R260 000 per annum, excluding perks and subsidies.

Dealing with the problems

It is often the knee-jerk response of a number of political commentators to assume that because of these problems the only answer is to trim or reduce the size of the public service. Given the extent to which certain sections of the community have been excluded from access to services and the opportunity for employment at the executive and senior executive level, such a view is extremely naive. Given the complex nature of the transition to democracy in this country, it is not unlikely that the future public service will be larger than the current one. The challenge is to maintain strict control of the budget, so that the public service does not eat up more of our resources than the country can afford.

We can make a number of assumptions on the restructuring of the public service. Nine provincial legislatures and provincial administrations will be established within weeks of the elections on 27 April. Since health, education and 19 other services will be delivered largely at the provincial level, the size of provincial government is likely to grow beyond the present 600 000 personnel employed by the present provincial administrations, TBVC and self-governing territories. The size of central government is likely to be reduced from the present roughly 750 000

personnel, as the provision of services is taken up by the provinces.

Restructuring – COSATU's vision of the process: a new spirit of public service

Sam Shilowa, the General Secretary of COSATU, has pointed out that restructuring must have the objective of making the public service representative of the South African population and responsive to the needs of the community. The ethic of serving the people must be inculcated into the culture of the public service. He also argues that services should be provided on a more rational basis, which would mean streamlining the number of departments and personnel which will exist at a national and provincial level. For example, the number of executive ranks could be reduced from six to four.

An important aspect of the restructuring process is the elimination of the gross income disparities between service providers and managers by rationalising the salary and grading structure. A new public service ethos can not be based on the principle that managers are rewarded 20 times more than workers who provide the services. This will be a tricky area and it is necessary that, whatever decisions are made, and however these are to be implemented, they must be based on negotiations with the various stakeholders – trade unions as representatives of employees and



communities as recipients of services. The process must be participatory.

The apartheid government has tried to develop its own 'change management'

in the public service by involving the various staff associations. These conservative associations pose a serious threat to transformation as they do not wish to see the "good old days of apartheid" disappear and are not committed to better services for the black community. How the democratically elected government deals with these creations of apartheid will be critical to the success or failure of any restructuring or reconstruction programme. In terms of COSATU's contribution to the restructuring process, it stands in our favour that, as Shilowa puts it, "COSATU will not be constrained in the way that the ANC as a government will be. Where the government cannot deliver the required change, then COSATU will, through workers taking action. This popular action, if linked to the communities needs, will remove the emphasis on the balance sheet".

Challenges for the unions

Currently NEHAWU, the COSATU affiliate organising in the public service, has organised only a small percentage of public servants. Its membership stands at about 100 000 and cuts across a number of departments, the bantustans and the parastatals. The proposed merger between POTWA, SAMWU and NEHAWU will certainly improve the capacity of the new union to organise, but some pressing issues need to be dealt with.

In the first instance, most of the 'professional' or 'white collar' public servants are either unorganised or organised in the staff associations. A coherent strategy needs to be implemented to ensure that workers are organised into the federation, and out of the staff associations. We have not dealt with the issue of professionalism in a satisfactory way, as is witnessed by nurses leaving SANA to form CONUSA, rather than joining COSATU.

Affirmative action also poses a serious problem if it is not implemented in the

proper manner. Minorities within the public service already see this as a threat to opportunities for them, and the unions will have to ensure that a process of education and information takes place that will remove many of the fears and prejudices which exist.

Rationalisation, no matter how well negotiated and organised, will always have the potential for casualties. More often than not, these will be the workers or the beneficiaries of certain services. The imperative of government is to govern and the ANC will not be immune to this. How the unions handle this complex relationship between the Alliance partners is of critical importance, particularly in the public service where the interface is so much sharper than in the private sector. Unions in the public service will have to change from a purely oppositional role to

one of a sophisticated strategy of challenging, supporting or ignoring the new government where necessary. It is also critical that industrial action is not taken blindly, but is targeted at the right places.

Conclusions

The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is, thus far, the programme that will offer the best co-ordination and integration of the different interests of the various stakeholders in the public sector restructuring process. But the RDP merely sets out a broad strategy and a minimum programme. COSATU must play an effective role in the future, both to further the aims of the RDP and to articulate the aspirations of workers in the public service. ☆



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