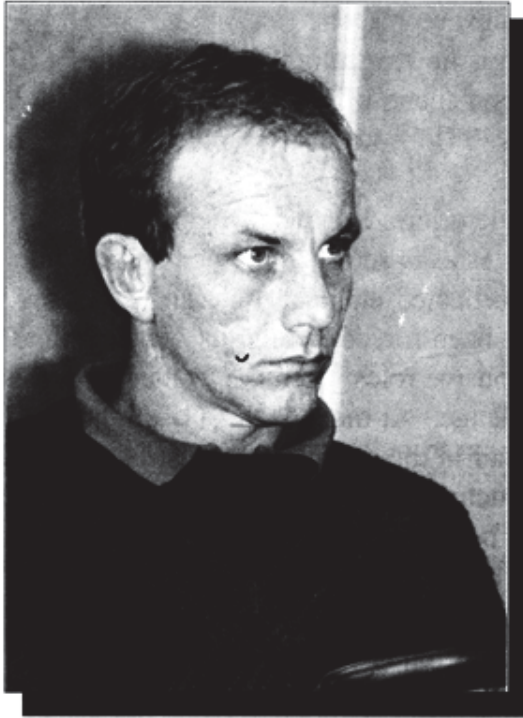


Restructuring the labour movement after apartheid



GEOFF SCHREINER* examines the capacity and trajectory of Cosatu after the elections, and argues for a far leaner, more professional organisation, which – while loyal to its heritage of participatory democracy – is able to make the adjustments necessary for its meaningful survival in the face of new economic, political and social realities.

Introduction

The labour movement and COSATU in particular has played a massively important role in bringing about an end to apartheid in South Africa. It has also had a major input into the process of drawing up a vision for the country after its first democratic elections, much of which is captured in the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).

Many commentators and trade union activists in particular expect that COSATU will continue to play a major role in formation of socio-economic policy and in seeing to the implementation of the RDP in the years to

come. Some expect COSATU to "lead" this process.

These views are, I would suggest, basically unrealistic. On the one hand they fail to take into account government pressures which will act upon the Federation to focus its energies on industrial relations matters – productivity, wages, working conditions and so on. More likely therefore is a government-union pact wherein the former promises to deliver on social wage issues and the latter on industrial stability. A pact of this kind may well be expanded to include the business sector which the government clearly recognises as its central partner in delivering the RDP. Left opposition to a social contract of this kind, given the current balance of forces, is unlikely to meet with much success.

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On the other hand it is questionable whether COSATU has the capacity to lead any reconstruction and development processes given its current situation. Levels of service to members are sorely wanting. Union leadership has tended to apply short-term solutions which have had little impact on the problems at hand. Members have had expectations dashed on many occasions – often in the name of broader anti-apartheid initiatives. In the current period there is likely to be less tolerance of the failure to meet such expectations, and in order to survive unions will have to prioritise the realisation of shop floor bread-and-butter demands.

If COSATU is to adapt to a much narrower role within the industrial relations sphere and if serving its membership is to be made a genuine priority then there is a range of changes which the Federation and its affiliates will need to confront urgently.

(i) New Economic Realities

Much of the economic thinking within COSATU and its affiliates has been drawn from a tradition which has revealed serious limitations. Radical transformations of the kind prophesied not long ago are not about to occur in South Africa, and even their desirability in the long term is now the subject of much debate.

There is now a greater awareness of the complexities of modern-day economies, of the value of markets as mechanisms of exchange, and even of the usefulness of private enterprise as a vehicle for economic growth. The difficulty of building/maintaining political democracy in the context of a centrally planned economy is now apparent. Short of the Socialist Utopia, it would seem that economic pluralism is as important as its political counterpart.

South Africa faces a new economic regime which will bind our economy much more closely into the global economic network. Short of the "Albanian option" there is little choice about this. Local companies will have to become more competitive without the benefit of tariff protection. New forms of work organisation and new

technologies will have to be introduced.

COSATU and the labour movement cannot successfully resist these new economic realities without fundamentally jeopardising the entire base of more than two decades of careful and painstaking organisation. The question really is one of how to embrace these realities in a way which impacts least negatively on, or put more positively, "advances" the interest of the constituency which it represents.

It is however not only a dropping of bygone economic rhetoric that is required. COSATU also has to be much more modest about its role in the process of industrial restructuring. It is not going to "lead" this process as is so often claimed – even highly sophisticated national trade union centres have been forced into largely reactive and responsive roles when confronted with this challenge. At most COSATU might be a partner in the process of industrial restructuring and if it plays its cards correctly may be able to secure an important range of concessions for its members.

If the South African economy is to grow at the rates required and if a vibrant export-orientated manufacturing sector is to be developed it will require the ongoing co-operation of business and labour, a co-operation built on mutual respect and acknowledgement of interdependence. Thorny issues of flexible working arrangements, increased productivity, labour-absorbing technology, deregulation and so on will have to be imaginatively tackled with a view to finding "win-win" solutions rather than by recourse to much of the current sterile, narrow, conflict-riddled approaches which characterise the current period.

(ii) Union Personnel Resources

One of the abiding strengths of the labour movement in South Africa has been its fusion of intellectual capacity with the skills of experienced shop floor leadership. This combination was able to develop highly sophisticated strategies and ensure that these were put into practice on the shop floor.

In the current period the situation is very



...."greater awareness of the value of markets as exchange mechanisms..."

different. Both COSATU and its affiliates have simply not been able to provide sufficient incentives to retain many of those who have developed immense organizational, intellectual and strategic abilities. Hence the haemorrhaging (both formal and informal) which is now occurring, particularly to the political realm. These developments coupled with COSATU's inability to find appropriate personnel to fill these gaps should not be underestimated in terms of its cost to the Federation.

This problem has been exacerbated by the failure of COSATU and its affiliates to develop any meaningful long-term training for shop-steward leadership and local organisers. The effects are that levels of service to members are often very poor, campaigns cannot be properly carried out, and frustration becomes the norm.

A consequence for senior worker leadership is that advancement through a company's ranks often becomes a far more exciting alternative than soldiering on in the union world where a sense of achievement becomes increasingly rare. Similar dynamics

within unions mean that senior vacancies cannot be filled.

The measures adopted to address these problems will of necessity be widely defined and quite complex and as such go beyond the scope of this paper. However some comments may be pertinent. Firstly, COSATU and its affiliates will have to get used to the idea that human resource managers and personnel officers who have the time and the capacity to develop proper training programmes and to focus on career path development (yes, within unions!) are essential.

Secondly, conditions will have to be made sufficiently attractive to retain, and perhaps regain, highly skilled staff who have now ventured off into other arenas. Nor only does the Federation have to aim at those with intellectual and organisational capacities, but if it wishes to play a role in restructuring it also has to aim at those with real technical skills derived from practical and theoretical sources. Quite simply this means paying market-related salaries (or at least being in this league) and offering terms and conditions

of service which are sufficiently flexible so as to accommodate the needs of the individuals concerned.

Thirdly the “anti-intellectual” currents which run in some parts of the movement (quite often merely thinly-disguised racial antagonisms) will have to be stemmed and environments created where all feel valued and fully recognised for their respective contributions.

(iii) New Organisational Forms

Many commentators have remarked that despite the very rapid growth of unions in South Africa during the 1990's – the fastest in the world – relatively few changes have been made structurally and organisationally to adjust to this radically altered membership base.

The issue can also be viewed from the perspective of the lack of responsiveness on the part of unions to the changing way in which workers are being organised at their places of work. On their way out are large-scale Fordist production techniques and increasingly we are witnessing moves towards various forms of flexible specialisation: small teams, multi-skilling, labour as a resource, sourcing-out and so on.

Huge industrial unions made organisational sense in the blue collar Fordist era. There was a symmetry between the way in which work was organised and the defence against exploitation (i.e. the form of union organisation). Flexible specialisation with its heavy focus on the team and ultimately the individual has little resonance with the massive industrial unions (amongst the biggest in the world) that we witness in South Africa today.

The bottom line however is that unions whose membership will be affected by radically new forms of workplace organisation will increasingly prioritise individual service over industry-wide industrial activities. For the main part members will (and already are) wanting assistance on their own career paths and on their “own” terms and condition of service, or where to get the best medical aid and so on.

If these services are not on offer, if there are no other professional services, if there are no serious benefit and insurance packages many members will eventually leave.

At the level of COSATU dramatic changes are required. With the suggested waning of its traditional political role, the Federation ought to focus its energies on, on the one hand, providing services to its affiliates on organisational and industrial issues (principally) and on the other, on providing an organised mouthpiece for labour to input in the process of policy formulation at national and regional levels.

To carry out these functions effectively, and increasingly to start to live on internal (rather than external) resources, COSATU will have to slim down very dramatically at all levels. If it is to retain and perhaps more importantly gain in capacity this will mean employing a small number of very highly experienced staff on terms competitive with what, as has been suggested, would be available in the private and independent sectors.

Finally more thought has to be given to the restructuring of the institutions within the labour market. Industrial councils, for example, with roots back to the 1920 – 30's have changed very little over the years. Instead of addressing the issue of updating or transcending the councils, the unions have been trapped into a sterile “for and against” debate regarding their continued existence. Far more fruitful would, within the current economic realities, be to establish some consensus on the nature and extent of industry bargaining and set about tailoring these archaic institutions to begin addressing these priorities.

The same line of approach could apply to productivity committees, workers councils, shop-steward structures through to the “highest echelons” of the National Manpower Commission (which seems to have become stuck at the first stage of its restructuring process). The tasks involved are not beyond those within the labour and business communities but, as will be suggested, require careful long-term planning and above all the

capacity to follow through the implementation phase in an ongoing and consistent manner.

(iv) Rethinking Participatory Democracy

Participatory democracy has been the heart of the organisational design and practice within the non-racial trade union movement in South Africa. Strongly held views on this principle infused the fabric of the anti-apartheid opposition during the 1980's and these organisations were increasingly pressurised to pay some homage to reliance on mandates, report backs and elaborate consultation processes.

The importance of this tradition cannot be underestimated. It stood opposed to the secret, bureaucratic, hierarchical and so often corrupt practices of the apartheid regime. It has laid the basis for demands around transparency and accountability and its survival is necessary to rein in the ever present pressures on political actors to act in high-handed and undemocratic ways.

However the labour movement will have

to become more realistic about the limits to participatory democracy in a context where unions are now many hundreds of thousands of members strong. Many unions have already concluded that not all decisions can be made at grass roots level – those that have not and claim the contrary, generally tend to be the most undemocratic in reality. In these cases the contradiction between stated goals and organisational practices are thoroughly disempowering and disillusioning experiences for union members.

Beyond the recognition that different kinds of decisions have to be made at various levels of the organisation is the need to accept more fully that as issues become more complex substantial decision making will have to end up in the hands of individuals rather than structures of any kind. This of course is the point where representative and participatory democracy meet. The argument, however, is not that participatory practices should give way to those of a representative kind. Rather it is being suggested that the labour movement needs to find a new balance



"...alternatives needed to current, sterile approaches..."

between these two "systems" which on the other hand ensures accountability and transparency and on the other promotes efficiency and individual initiative.

In gearing different levels of the union to make different kinds of decisions – and these limits and possibilities should be clearly spelt out – the focus should increasingly be placed on developing a system of broadly based mandates for the staff, office bearers and appointed experts/consultants to work on behalf of the organisation in a range of different spheres.

The task of the union secretariat then becomes that of management of the required reports from these representatives, ensuring that major policy issues are discussed in the structures, co-ordinating and linking the activities of representatives, providing guidance and support. The bottom line thus is that union secretariats have to become efficient managers of information if the proper balance between democracy and efficiency is to be found. Perhaps therefore the traditional requirement for such posts as public prominence, shopfloor popularity, "hard-core rhetoric" etc. need to be more carefully weighed.

(v) New alliances

It is widely accepted that nearly 50% of South Africans are now unemployed and that a very large percentage of those in employment are in low wage, high insecurity, service sectors such as domestic work, agriculture, cleaning, security and so on.

The incoming government of national unity may change this picture to some extent, but even the most optimistic of the expectations do not expect a fundamentally different scenario in the short-medium term.

As its role gradually shifts to a more narrowly-constructed labour movement there will be a great deal of pressure on COSATU to prioritise and champion the cause of the most privileged sections of the working class – those who have stable, formal sector employment, relatively high wages and those who dominate the leadership echelons of the movement. COSATU cannot afford not to

address the fears, hopes and concerns of this section of the working class for if it fails in this regard opposition unions and federations will fill the gap. These are however real choices to be made about how to address these interests in ways which do not compromise the interest and concerns of the poorest and most marginalised sectors of society.

Classical notions of class interest and solidarity which fitted more easily with a far less economically complex bygone era are unhelpful here. Class divisions are often not the most important cleavages in any social formation at a given point in time, while divisions *within* classes may be of greater significance than divisions *between* classes. This reality demands of sectionally-constructed organisations that they recognise the need to support and encourage other organisations which seek to represent the interest of other parts of the working class.

At one level this support might rather take the form of providing material resources to such organisations. It may also involve assisting to create a climate in which such organisations can flourish and grow. Elsewhere it has been argued that COSATU should take a far stronger stand in seeking to support the institutionalisation of broadly inclusive advisory forums within key sectors and at different levels of government. These forums could as suggested provide an organisational focus for the many marginalised groups in society to have their voices heard in the process of public policy formulations.

(vi) Forward to strategic planning

Much of the foregoing points to the need for more competent strategic planning (and execution) within COSATU and its affiliates. At present most union officials are heavily overloaded workwise and crisis management has become the norm.

Planning does occur but usually it is ad hoc and "on the hoof". Coupled with this is the reality that the bigger, fewer and more exciting challenges get priority while the boring, more intractable and all too often



"50% of South Africans are now unemployed" – Workseekers gather outside a Reef factory

more fundamental problems get left to swell and fester.

It has been suggested that the scale of the problem has increased dramatically in the recent period and the problems attached to the "bit solutions" of the earlier period are multiplied many times over in the current circumstances. Proper union management has to be systematic, it cannot make do with the occasional comforting *bosberaad*. It requires open leadership and not those who will not admit mistakes, who operate on the basis of whim and who make a virtue of the necessity to be seen to be in control.

Open strategic planning can build a culture of systematic, openness, and accountability.

Union leadership generally has immense organisational capacity and the task of developing proper systems for organisational development is largely within their capacity. However there is a range of skills borne by professionals in the field which can be drawn on to design processes which are genuinely

inclusive and empowering. Above all unions have to recognise the need to locate staff in and around their organisations whose *exclusive* tasks are to monitor and ensure that plans and programmes are fully implemented in a sustained and ongoing way.

Conclusion

That the union movement will change over the next few years is surely unquestionable. The key question is will it have change forced upon it or will it have the strength to recognise the need for major change itself and take steps in this direction in the near future.

This is the challenge faced by COSATU and unions more broadly. It demands a course of action which threatens those who have developed vested interest in the status quo and those who have acquired positions of privilege and power. COSATU has however faced and overcome massive hurdles in its past. There is no immediate reason to conclude that it will falter at this stage. ☆