

# Shadow boxing?

## Cosatu, social movements and the ANC government

To ensure a rigorous assessment of its role, Cosatu invited participants from both the left and the right to its conference to celebrate ten years of democracy. **Ashwin Desai** presented some provocative options – as a political dietician – (no disrespect to Dr Manto) on what the organisation needs to eat and whom to eat with as it gets back into shape.

*the ring-side*

*I did not enjoy the violence of boxing so much as the science of it. I was intrigued by how one moved one's body to protect oneself, how one used a strategy both to attack and retreat, how one paced oneself over a match.*

*Nelson Mandela*

A trade union, like a boxer, is only as good as the last fight. There are few things more pathetic than watching exhibition matches by impoverished legends of the ring such as Max Schmeling, George Foreman and Mike Tyson blundering about

throwing ineffectual roundhouses at men half their age and calibre and then, around about the third round, succumbing to a body blow or sucker punch.

And so, forgive me if I do not sing Cosatu's praises of a time when it was a fit and fearsome champion of class and national liberation struggles. For the last few years, it has grieved many to see Cosatu, punch drunk, scarcely able to lift its hands against an onslaught of right upper-cuts from lightweight nationalist parliamentarians, bar-room brawlers in the ANC, the rank amateurs of the Youth League and, at the risk of seeming sexist, handbag waving ministers. At the same time, Cosatu's attempts to push back the frontiers of control on the shop floor have floundered. In fact, the captains of industry have in many cases managed to re-assert 'managerial prerogative' over corners of the work place they lost control of in the cauldron of the 1980s.

Luckily a body politic is capable of regeneration. There are signs that the cut-men have stemmed the flow of blood and that some in Cosatu have hauled out that old skipping rope and got back into a training programme again. Beneath the ideological flabbiness of alliance-speak emerges the six-pack that comes from taking principled stands: purging certain politically corrupt officials and office-bearers and decrying the scandals of government's Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS and BEE policy. You know what it takes better than I do to get fighting fit again.

### SHADOW BOXING?

*It is like a broken CD that just keeps repeating itself. The alliance, including Cosatu, has been generally sidelined from the process of policy formulation and transformation for most of the ten years of governance. Then, six months before elections, without even a summit to formally endorse the elections strategy of the Manifesto, we get drawn into election task*

*teams that work efficiently to mobilise the base and rally the troops. In the victory celebrations, the public hugging follows. Yet a few months down the line, the reality of being sidelined returns, leading to public disagreements over key policy directions (COSATU, 2004).*

The life of a sparring partner can be tough.

To change your lot in life my first advice as a dietician is to eat humble pie. Many within your ranks have held onto the delusion that your association with the ANC would make a meaningful change to the lives of the broad working class. Instead you have witnessed the ANC change from an organisation enunciating policies of collective liberation into one seeking individual emancipation. The new ethos and morals imposed by crass materialism have been brought to the fore by the head of ANC presidency's (Smuts Ngonyama) defence of his right to make money quickly. He is quoted as having said that, 'I did not join the struggle to become poor' (COSATU, 2004). Now you have been reduced to needing the ANC more than it needs you (except during campaigning every election year). I am not suggesting that your success as a federation needs to be judged by whether a socialist revolution has taken place or not. Conditions, post the collapse of the USSR, have not permitted such a development.

Measured with even this far more modest and reformist tape, Cosatu has failed to win even moderate levels of hegemony in post-apartheid South Africa. Even within the paradigm of what is regarded as sound, free-market policies, the federation has failed to exert itself within the alliance for the better of its constituency. Even while keeping the budget-deficit within the preferred range of the Washington Consensus, more could have been done to ensure pro-worker policies in respect of:

- the strength of the rand;

## COVER STORY



*I have detected relatively few Mbeki-sycophants in the rank and file. It's hard to be a sycophant from a position of insecurity about your job, low wages, death from HIV/AIDS all around, while a small black elite join the whites at the trough of corruption and profiteering where they make out that its your own individual failing that you're not driving an X5 and winning tenders right and left.*



suggest, from a government anxious about previously botched listings, too much foreign control of key-parastatals and an over-exposed pool of ANC-aligned BEE partners. Cosatu should claim no easy victories, as if in response to two sparring sessions that ensured the 'big guy' never really got hurt, Cabinet has genuinely gone southpaw, made a so-called *left turn*.

To me, these failures are not only the result of ideological confusion. There is, in my contact with many ordinary officials and shop stewards in Cosatu affiliates, a genuine will to class struggle. I have detected relatively few Mbeki-sycophants in the rank and file. It's hard to be a sycophant from a position of insecurity about your job, low wages, death from HIV/AIDS all around, while a small black elite join the whites at the trough of corruption and profiteering where they make out that its your own individual failing that you're not driving an X5 and winning tenders right and left.

However, reluctance to buy the SA success story myth does not translate into sufficient confidence to attack the myth, or the ruling party that makes them poor. Among the rank and file, there is a reluctance to challenge this state of affairs mainly because there is a sense of strategic exhaustion not ideological confusion. Ordinary people remain remarkably clear about what is to be done, but how, remains the question.

This question arises because acts of popular illegality, insurrectionary acts, are deemed to be out of order in the new democratic order. There are some interesting ideas floating around as to why this is. Even in social movements that have no connection or alliance to the ruling party in government, an uncanny commitment to the rule of law exists. Let's face it, you get nowhere staying within the boundaries of the law. Whatever else it does, the law protects the status quo, and it only permits conduct that is safe in

substance and form for those who made the laws. Of course, the law permits changes that are in the interest of the powers that be, but the discourse of transformation has limits that are quite severe once one tries to go beyond their template. And it is because they sense the limitations of the power that they can *legally* muster that many members of Cosatu have let themselves and their organisation go. What are these traditional and legal forms of exercise of power that no longer work:

- The protected wage strike has had its teeth pulled.
- Workplace forums were a fraud, a joke, and a trick from day one. The exercise of worker control through these mechanisms is absent in over 80% of South African firms.
- Labour law jurisprudence is on a steady rightward slide.
- Lobbying government has got you nowhere. You are held in contempt by the presidency and Nedlac is routinely bypassed on matters of import.
- Socioeconomic protest action has been sparingly used, partly because of legal impediments. When it has been used it too has been symbolic and its demands framed in a narrow workerist manner.

I believe that if a more effective mechanism for the exercise of power was to be imagined, Cosatu leadership would find a rank and file only too ready for class struggle, as long as it was not just another damp-squib strike and memorandum handover.

### A LEFT HOOK?

*Whereas traditional trade unions defend the economic interests of a limited category of workers, we need to create labour organisations that can represent the entire network of singularities that collaboratively produce wealth. One modest proposal that points in this direction, for example, involves*

- inflation targeting;
- excessive and unaccountable military spending at the expense of social welfare and education;
- a proper and functional national skills development programme;
- a basic income grant (BIG);
- a meaningful public works programme;
- a comprehensive roll-out of HIV/AIDS medication;
- tariff-barrier reductions;
- ameliorative industrial strategy measures in the collapsing clothing and textile industry (or does the 2010 Soccer World Cup count?); and
- broad-based black economic empowerment as opposed to crony-capitalism.

Whatever concessions might have been made around privatisation recently flow, I would



*opening up trade unions to other segments of society by merging them with the powerful social movements that have emerged in recent years... (Hardt and Negri, 2004).*

As your dietician, after humble pie, I would recommend the olive branch. This needs to be extended to community movements that some in Cosatu were fond of labelling 'ultra-leftist' in 1999 when they began to emerge in Durban, Soweto and Cape Town. Having become the new 'ultra-leftists' yourselves and groggy from the right upper-cuts of those who so crudely and stupidly lash out with these words, Cosatu needs to begin extending the hand of friendship - if not complete ideological agreement - to the Anti-Privatisation Forum's (APF), eThekweni Social Forum's and Anti-Eviction Campaigns of South Africa. Progressive civil society in South Africa is not limited to legal NGOs like the TAC. Here you will not only find potential allies but also thousands of former members,

many of whom make up the leadership of what you have derisively referred to 'single issue' and 'particularistic' movements. While these labels have veracity, it is pretty rich coming from a federation whose unions have been signing onto productivity and outsourcing agreements that entrench 'managerial prerogative' as long as the 'single issue' of the annual wage increase is delivered.

In their interaction with community movements and indeed all social struggles outside the workplace, Cosatu must bear in mind that efforts to assume control over these struggles will be warded off. Classical notions of leadership, vanguardism and organisation that informed the struggles of the past have been transcended by these new social movements who will not be content to give up their autonomy in broad fronts, displaying 'revolutionary discipline' and backing down every time the president becomes piqued at what they do.

You must also not expect traditional meeting procedures or constitutions and membership lists. Many of these organisations are nebulous. This does not mean they are weak or ineffective. Unlike the leviathans of national labour bureaucracies, they move 'like butterflies and sting like bees'. They are indeed as you have called them a 'motley crew' acting in a 'side-show'. But when under attack by municipalities trying to evict, or cut water, they have shown themselves to be tough, brave and composed of thousands. But these same thousands are grannies and kids, single mothers and the unemployed, priests and sometimes even gangsters who disappear into their normal lives after the crisis is over leaving a relatively small core of two dozen or so trusted people to tend to the affairs of the movement. And because of the immediately conflictual and episodic nature of relationships, uncontrolled by corporatist scripts, community activists are not prone to 'taking a dive' unlike many unionists if Labour Minister Membathisi Mdladana is to be believed: 'Unionists are too busy drinking tea with management instead of listening and attending to workers' complaints'.

Do not expect ideological purity from

these movements. Do not expect that even the leadership will know about the WTO or the World Bank. This is not entirely their fault. But they know their enemies. It is the mayor, local councillor (whatever his or her party) and their armed henchmen, most immediately. And in the distance, they probably can see Pretoria's hand, and know that in turn, the councillors are also pawns in the game, with budgets tightened and Municipal Financial Management Act threats made by Trevor Manuel and his treasury enforcers. Do not undermine the social movements immediate choice of targets for it is their closeness to their foe that makes them so strong. But I am sure they could benefit from a more structural and macroeconomic understanding of their oppression that you could bring to them. Social movements also need to recognise the limitations of a 'go it alone' strategy. Many of the 'community movements' are parochial and insular, seemingly unable or unwilling to breach the boundaries of inherited 'group areas'. These community movements especially will benefit from Cosatu's national linkages, resources and legitimacy and it is incumbent on them to reach out to their class allies.

#### COUNTER-PUNCHING

*...the political marginalisation of labour reflects a social marginalisation of work as a source of stability, identity and emancipatory visions for an expanding section of the working class. On the other hand, the everyday lives of working class communities are continuously affected by the detrimental impact of neoliberal economic policies on social reproduction. Faced with these uncomfortable realities, popular responses to neoliberalism are forced to experiment with innovative methods... (Barchesi, 2004).*

As already indicated, Cosatu campaigns cannot be simply about wages and the workplace but need to be linked to broader issues of redistribution and macroeconomic policy-making. For example, Gill Hart in her fascinating book, *Disabling Globalisation* found that workers in northern KwaZulu-Natal labouring in Taiwanese-owned factories

were earning up to 50% more than workers in similar factories in Taiwan. Of course, the immediate response would be to cut wages. But what Hart found was that the South African workers had 50% less buying power because the Chinese workers had access to small plots of land and public transport. So the struggle cannot be just about wages. It has to be about land and a struggle against privatisation of transport and the commodification of basic services. Surely, this is a more fruitful struggle to wage than the gimmicky Buy South African campaign.

So more practically, instead of attempting exclusively to extract value directly from employers on, at best an industry by industry basis, and at worst, site by site, in the form of annual, uncoordinated wage strikes, it would make sense to link the struggle for wage increases with a co-ordinated huge annual income strike. In order to make sense of this, it is necessary briefly to look at the difference between the terms 'wages' and 'income'. For most blue-collar workers, wages are the cash they receive coupled with medical aid contributions perhaps or an employer contribution to a pension scheme. Statutory deductions in lieu of UIF, although administered by the state, would also be included in the wage. 'Income', on the other hand, issues from government and is usually available to citizens as a whole. In dealing with 'income', the unit of analysis is no longer what the individual worker gets *ex contractu*, but what value or wealth the household gets in the form of social services, subsidies, pensions, grants or other welfare instruments.

While the strictures of labour law make it hard to approach a recalcitrant boss for a raise in wages, protest action to obtain a raise from government is, if done properly, far easier. One of the reasons for this is that a boss does not rely on workers voting for him. Income struggles are also potentially more massive and can be co-ordinated in a manner maximally disruptive to society not only one store, factory or industry. Not only are the people employed at a particular factory activated, but also grandparents, schoolchildren, the unemployed and workers wherever they work, are thrown into action. An income strike benefits the working members of a family because the pressure is

taken off their wage to purchase the commodities necessary to sustain life for the month. There is literally more money in a workers pocket after a successful income strike.

What sort of value can be added to the overall wealth of a family or community from income struggles? Recent reports put the average price of water and electricity services in townships at R120 per household per month. If the demand was for half of that to be subsidised by government, that would be equivalent to a 3% wage increase for any worker in that house earning R2 000 per month. The list of plausible income demands include:

- transport subsidies;
- genuinely free education;
- increase in pension;
- BIG;
- exemption from VAT of certain consumables;
- free water and electricity;
- free HIV/AIDS medication; and
- food coupons.

Instead of trying to force extra wages from bosses, it would then fall to government to raise the funds for these measures - the test all governments should be facing: losing the next election or either raising taxes on the rich, cutting arms spending or properly dealing with corruption and waste. Does it want to do any of these things?

These kinds of struggle would take place when public service struggles should take place, months before the annual budget is announced. Although public sector unions may argue that they already target government in their wage disputes, the problem is they do so at the wrong time and focus on the wrong minister. The budget and Finance Minister Trevor Manuel are the entities to apply pressure to, not Fraser-Moelikheid (Moleketi) and various provincial ministers who must apportion an already fixed gross amount of money.

In struggling in tandem with the rhythm of the annual budget, one will avoid the bi-annual farce (and inevitable sell-out) of public sector strikes that are ultimately fought about the allocation of a fixed amount of money. In framing demands that include the broad working class, one will win the

support for working class struggles of the majority of people in this country - the unemployed.

### CLASS FIGHTERS?

*People like to see miracles. People like to see underdogs that do it. People like to be there when history is made.'*

*Muhammad Ali on the Rumble in the Jungle*

I can already hear some people arguing that this is an ultra-left plot to destroy the alliance with the ruling party. Not so. I don't believe Cosatu should leave the alliance with the ANC. You're far too weak to go it alone at this stage. Frankly, what is called for is not a symbolic act like breaking the alliance, but a practical one in support of the ideas that historically underpinned that alliance. There is nothing incompatible with an alliance with the ANC in challenging local or national government to remain, in its social spending, true to the Freedom Charter or RDP, if you like a more modern touchstone. Let them chuck you out if they don't want popular participation in setting the budget, but you don't have to go, in order to pursue this new orientation.

I suspect that you will not only provide leadership to your own members and to members of fledgling community movements, but also to many who would consider themselves ANC stalwarts. My firm belief is that many of these comrades are not sell-outs as much as they are caught up in a kind of strategic inertia. No one likes to start a fight that they feel they are not equipped to win. The leadership of the ANC and black and white business interests give the impression that they have everything sewn up. Legally and institutionally speaking, they've got any fight in this country rigged. But give the silent majority who are disgusted with the direction our liberation is taking just a sniff of blood, and you will bring out the class fighter in them again.

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*This is an edited version of a paper presented by Desai at Cosatu's conference marking ten years of democracy. Desai is an academic and has a research fellowship at Centre for Civic Society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.*