

# Social movements

## Cosatu and the 'new UDF'

The recent launch of the coalition against poverty and joblessness by Cosatu's Western Cape region and various civil society organisations has caused much debate as to whether this move constitutes a 'new UDF' and hence represents a shift in Cosatu's approach to dealing with social movements. **Oupa Lehulere** argues that if the Left sees Cosatu – or its members – as the most important force for militant and socialist politics in the country, they are in for a disappointment.



The media has speculated that Cosatu has changed its approach to working with social movements and even claimed it was plotting with them to launch a new United Democratic Front (UDF) which would challenge the ANC. Cosatu denies it, but the media continues to feast on the intriguing possibility of a strong opposition party to the ANC.

Cosatu's official position on social movements is stated in a resolution adopted at its national congress in 2003. It stated: "The emergence of social movements 'hostile to the alliance'... necessitates the strengthening and consolidating of the political centre, with a view to leading the masses on the issues that have given rise to these single issue based movements. Cosatu's task is to 'lead and mobilise mass campaigns to avoid opportunism and undermining of Alliance organisations.'"

In other words, Cosatu at that time

recognised there were real issues behind the movements but wanted to make sure they did not rock the alliance boat by bringing them under control - 'the agenda of these organisations (should) not aim to liquidate or undermine the alliance partners' is how it was put.

This therefore is the road Cosatu has travelled when dealing with social movements but what of the recent rhetorical kissing of the movements? In trying to see if the road has taken a sharp turn, it is important not to believe everything the press has written and to remember the kissing started at the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) where Cosatu and the alliance could hardly ignore social movements. The current rhetoric is not caused by the movements' strength but on the contrary, its temporary weakness means Cosatu can now afford to give them some encouragement.

## HOW DO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS VIEW COSATU?

There are currently two attitudes to Cosatu in the social movements

- Indifference from the mass of active militants responsible for the day-to-day organising in the townships. Many had no history of contact with Cosatu in its militant years or with the Congress Movement as a movement of struggle.
- The attitude of the 'old Left' who have been active socialists from (at least) the late 1980s and the early to mid-1990s. They share a common experience of socialist politics, which, I will argue, is important in understanding the way they approach Cosatu today. The 'Lefts' involved are mainly grouped around the Keep Left current in Johannesburg, the Socialist Group (also mainly in Johannesburg) and Brian Ashley and Co (mainly from Cape Town). Activist Ashwin Desai also has a lot in common with these groups - although there is no agreement on all questions.

## ATTITUDE OF THE MASS OF MILITANTS TO COSATU

Those who have battled in the streets heard silence from Cosatu.

In some cases, as part of the alliance with SANCO and the ANC, the federation was seen as supporting the evictions and cuts in social services, which caused the problem.

As a result the attitude is that Cosatu must break the alliance with the ANC if it is to achieve any credibility among this group. For the militants, as long as the alliance persists, Cosatu is part of the other side.

Cosatu's relationship with the new movements was tested during the WSSD. For the new movements, the WSSD was an opportunity to unite and mobilise against the neo-liberal policies of the ANC. The ANC was meanwhile anxious to present itself to the world - especially its former supporters in the international anti-apartheid movement - as a party of liberation representing the continuity of the progressive project of liberation from globalisation.

Within the Civil Society Indaba, Cosatu was seen as the leader of the pro-ANC bloc. It was this that formed the militants' attitude to Cosatu. This schism was completed when Cosatu joined the march largely inspired, if not organised, by the ANC. For the mass of militants, therefore, Cosatu is associated with the ANC - the party that evicts them from their houses, that cuts their water, privatises their schooling. While one can argue this understanding is unsophisticated and narrow, it is real. For example, Cosatu has not displayed a fraction of the energy it has displayed in defending former deputy



president Jacob Zuma for the struggling masses in dusty townships. They got no songs and praise, no SMS campaigns, no trust funds to bail out those accused of public violence, no funeral funds for those killed in combat, no T-shirts in honour of the water that no longer runs, or of energy cuts in the heart of winter. So Cosatu must respond to this challenge and see whether tactical alliances are still possible.

## ATTITUDES OF THE 'OLD LEFTS' TO COSATU

Currently there is no single statement on how they view Cosatu, and if they see a place for it in the struggle for socialism today. Analysing the views of this group is not easy because they do not write down positions or hold systematic arguments.

One could understand this from the mass of militants who still have to learn the art of framing arguments in overall political and philosophical frameworks. But that some of the 'old Lefts' still fail to provide documentation of their positions shows how far the masses still have to go to win the struggle.

Two texts give some idea of the attitude of the 'old Lefts'. One is by Ashley and Co (Document of our political initiative). It deals with the need for the regrouping of socialists and a 'united front against neo-liberalism' and develops an approach to Cosatu. The second is by Ashwin Desai - a paper he delivered at Cosatu's 10 Years of Democracy Conference in March this year entitled *Shadow Boxing? Cosatu, social movements and the ANC government*.

What is striking about the Ashley and Co paper is that the entire strategy focus is on Cosatu, who we are told, whilst being the biggest and the most militant section of the trade union movement, has grown weak over the last few years. The weakness is ascribed to 'lack of political independence and

autonomy' from the ANC. There follows a discussion of how Cosatu's independence is to be regained through struggles within the federation. Intervention in Cosatu, according to this argument, must be directed at getting it to take up daily struggles, and this will ensure that the 'logic of the continuation of the Alliance will be posed'.

On relationships with the new movements, the paper says: 'The struggle to rebuild Cosatu and to regain its political independence and militant tradition will not be the result of rank and file struggle alone. A number of shocks from without will have to pave the way. The emergence of militant and radical social movements with a mass base that take up the struggles against the failure of the new government to transform the lives of the majority and resist the impact of its conservative macroeconomic policies

will have a major impact in "keeping Cosatu honest".

The paper lists the new movements and says: 'As these formations develop a cadre of activists that see the necessity of engaging with the union movement to provide the necessary social weight to challenge capital and the state more fundamentally objectively and increasingly organically the formation of a united front against neo-liberalism will be posed.'

The chain of actions as outlined by the 'old Lefts' looks like this

- The key task of the moment is to build a militant and radical mass movement.
- Though weak, Cosatu is the key to this project.
- The 'struggle for the soul of Cosatu' cannot only be waged from within the federation.
- The role of the social movements in this project is to keep Cosatu honest, in other words, to shift Cosatu towards a militant and radical politics.
- The movements must develop a cadre of activists that see the need to engage with the unions (meaning Cosatu, of course).
- When this has happened, a united front with Cosatu will be formed, like for instance the new-UDF, and the 'radical and militant mass movement' will be realised.

This ranks Cosatu as the most important and the movements as secondary. How have things turned out in fact?

During the run-up to the WSSD and the August 31 march, when the split between Cosatu and the new social movements became imminent, Ashley positioned himself as a middleman and as an honest broker. Rather than come over to the side of the new social movements, Ashley chose not to attend any march at all: it was either Cosatu or nothing. His next move has come with the initiative around the new UDF. The most striking thing about the new UDF initiative, in which the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC) (where Ashley and some of his comrades work) was prominent, is that none of the social movements were engaged by Ashley and Co in the search for a united front with Cosatu.

The reason is obvious: it was politically impossible to do this because Cosatu's political position does not allow it. And so during the WSSD it was Cosatu or nothing,

and in the 'new-UDF' initiative it is Cosatu and nothing.

The important lesson is that although the old Left argues that the militancy of the social movements will 'keep Cosatu honest', and by linking with Cosatu lead to the breaking of the alliance, they know that this selfsame militancy also pushes Cosatu away. They have chosen Cosatu, and so made clear their primary strategy. For them the movements are a sideshow whose 'importance and potential' lies in 'keeping Cosatu honest'.

However, Ashley and Co should know that from its launch up to its demise the UDF had almost no representation from the major militant unions. In fact, even those unions like Food and Canning, which had historical roots in the Congress tradition, did not join the UDF.

Another important document on how to understand the role of Cosatu today comes from Desai, as mentioned previously. The role he sees for Cosatu is

- Cosatu would bring - to the new movements - a more 'structural and macroeconomic understanding of their oppression'.
- The community movements would benefit from Cosatu's national linkages, resources and legitimacy, and of course the movements should reach out to 'their class allies'.
- There is also the fact that, for Cosatu, links with the movements such as the APF would present great strategic options for Cosatu. In other words, it is in Cosatu's self-interest to link up with the movement.

Desai goes on: '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 act 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.'

Of course, Desai does not believe that all the radical things he suggests - especially his strategy of breaking the law - will happen

without shaking the alliance, or to borrow words from Ashley and Co, without 'posing the question of the alliance'.

According to Desai, there are about five reasons why this strategic orientation to Cosatu is necessary. Principal among them is that workers are 'only too ready for class struggle, as long as it was not just another damp-squib strike and memorandum handover'.

### A CRITIQUE OF THE POLITICAL BASIS OF THE TURN TO COSATU

There are therefore two sides to the arguments for turning to Cosatu - the members are ready to fight, and the weakness of the new social movements.

The traditions of militancy for which Cosatu is now world-renowned emerged in the 1970s but Cosatu has changed in a dramatic and fundamental way.

Sakhela Buhlungu and Eddie Webster, in a survey of Cosatu membership, found profound changes. The average Cosatu member is growing older, and is in middle age. Secondly, the Cosatu member of the militant 1980s was a blue-collar worker. According to Buhlungu and Webster in 1994 60% of Cosatu members were unskilled and semi-skilled. Today the majority (60%) is made up of skilled, supervisory and clerical workers. These members are permanent and now have higher educational qualifications. The present day Cosatu member, who is white collar, is also upwardly mobile.

More importantly, however, many of the present crop of workers joined the unions after Cosatu's formation, and thus the extent to which they are steeped in Cosatu's militant tradition is itself questionable.

Desai and Ashley and Co have therefore created an idealised view of the Cosatu member, and they cling to this image in much the same way that they cling to the 'traditions of the Freedom Charter'.

How is the member held down by middle age and a mortgage, career prospects in government and business, supposed to break the law as Desai suggests? Desai, and the many 'old Lefts' who are seduced by the past, dare not ask these uncomfortable questions.

The question that needs to be asked is Why do communities in South Africa, who seek to change the existing order, take up struggles while today's unions get exhausted even before they take up any struggles?

Contrary to what the old Left might want to believe, we have to accept that the difference between the union member and the community member lies in the fact that the community member, especially the new breed of activist that is being thrown up by the struggles in the township, is relatively free of the ideological baggage that holds the union member down. She or he is also free of the baggage that comes with upward mobility, or at least the possibility of upward mobility.

So what kind of 'structural and macroeconomic understanding' will Cosatu bring to the movements?

After all we know that the present industrial policy (even if Cosatu for some reason continues to insist that there is no industrial strategy) of liberalisation was developed by Cosatu economists - the Economic Trends Group which became the Industrial Strategy Project (ISP) and which now lives in the Department of Trade and Industry.

Is this the kind of understanding that Cosatu will bring to the social movements? While one acknowledges that the movements are weak and have a lot to learn, this is certainly not the kind of 'lessons' they need to learn. The university of the streets, of the real, not imaginary class struggles in the townships and dorpias, schools, rural villages, and (yes!) even factories and mines, is a much better school of strategic studies.

### WILL THE MOVEMENTS BENEFIT FROM COSATU'S NATIONAL SPREAD?

The first issue that needs to be taken up is the claim that the movements are 'parochial'. The movements are weak, but are they parochial? In the very short lifespan of the new social movement we have seen the emergence of movements based in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. All have identified Gear and globalisation in one way or another as being at the heart of the problems they face.

Let us take Cosatu's general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi at the 10 Years of Democracy Conference: '[Cosatu] should be the voice of the working class... to ensure better conditions in the workplace while it equally campaigns and lobbies for pro-poor policies.' This is a far cry from the Cosatu

that argued that its role was to 'promote the working class as a dominant political and economic power'. This is what being parochial means - a shift from class power to being a lobby group!

Cosatu certainly has a head office, and more money than the movements. But national linkages imply unparalleled authority in the mass movement and that is long gone. What Cosatu will bring to the movements is not any national linkage and resources for struggle, but the dead weight of bureaucracy.

Because of the way they treat this issue, both Ashley and Co and Desai paint themselves into a corner. According to Ashley and Co, the emergence of social movements with a mass base and a militant politics will be important in shifting Cosatu to the left. But surely this an admission that just because Cosatu is at the point of production it does not follow that it is the starting point of the revival.

After a long period of decline in strike activity, there appears to be a revival of industrial action on the part of some sections of the working class. For those who believe in a primary orientation to Cosatu, and for those who argue (as I do) that the new social movements are the organisations that will lead the revival in this particular historical period, we both need to pay attention to any suggestions of a revival in the unions, and how this can link up with the struggles currently underway.

What is clear from the strikes that have taken place in the recent period is that they were a response to the deterioration that has taken place in living standards over the last few years. Also the leadership of the unions was rather anxious to ensure that these strikes were not seen as political.

We need to be sober in our assessment of the 'class struggle' potential of the strikes. What is clear from the recent strikes is that it would take a free imagination (free from reality) to interpret them as the beginning of a revival. What we have seen are procedural strikes, and they have not shown a combative mood within the unionised working class.

Should the social movements be afraid of 'missing the boat' if they do not bow to Cosatu?

Over the last five to ten years - and some would say before that - Cosatu has steadily drifted to the right. This can be seen in its economic policy, in its preparedness to provide voting fodder to the ANC even without any electoral conditions, and the way it has continued to provide this voting fodder even when after every election the ANC has gone on its many union-bashing exercises.

Today Cosatu is more active in parliament - with hundreds of submissions - than it is within the working class as leader and political organiser. We now have a federation that is more concerned about a most disgraceful issue of supporting former Deputy President Zuma. We have a federation that - notwithstanding Desai's observation that it has large resources to bring to the social movement - still does not have a national newspaper.

The catalogue of failures, of rightward drifting policies, of the conscious refusal to struggle, of capitulation in the face of ANC pressure, and more recently of embarrassing and outright shameful escapades is endless.

According to Claire Ceruti (an activist in the social movements and one of the old Lefts) we should be optimistic about 'the power of our politics and the potential of these hairline cracks (referring to the formation of the "new UDF") forming in the ANC monolith'. In other words, Ceruti and company would like us to believe that although for the last five to ten years we have not managed to shift this drift to the right, if we are 'not pessimistic' then we will be fine, and we will all live happily ever after.

The assumptions the 'old Lefts' make about Cosatu have no basis in reality and in many cases there is no analysis, just a whole set of wishes, hopes and unfounded optimism.

What accounts for this blind chasing after Cosatu? What accounts for this lack of faith in the movements (and I am using this word here to encompass all the communities who are taking up struggles against neo-liberalism) that are slowly but surely taking up their rightful place in national political life?

There are a number of reasons that account for this apparently irrational behaviour.

The first is that the old Lefts are afraid of 'missing the boat' as they did in the 1980s.

The second is that this rising chorus among the lefts to embrace Cosatu reflects a lull, a temporary retreat, in the development of the social movements since 2002.

Thirdly, the hope that Cosatu will be the saviour reflects, within the old Lefts, a 'strategic exhaustion', to borrow a phrase from Desai.

When the 1980s began, the hegemony of the Congress movements was not yet established, and indeed the 'workerists' were the dominant force in Fosatu (the union federation that came before Cosatu). But by 1987 the hegemony of Congress politics in Cosatu, and in the mass movement as a whole was secured and consolidated. The leftists watched, sometimes in horror, sometimes with demoralised eyes, as the 'populists' won the day and Cosatu left them behind.

The Lefts have not yet recovered from the political and psychological scars of the defeats of the 1980s, and these scars continue to be a powerful factor in the thinking of many old Lefts. Many of the old Lefts today are terrified of a repeat experience, where a new wave of struggles erupts, and they are again left behind and a new mass movement or party is formed in which they have no influence.

This leads me to a second important point that needs to be understood about the 1980s. It is this: The UDF became the political force that it became, and Congress managed to win and consolidate its hegemony, because it responded to, and linked up with, the spontaneous struggles in South African townships. I cannot over-emphasise the strategic and political importance of this point for the future of the struggle for socialism today.

Are the social movements in retreat? Ceruti observed: 'Sure, we pulled 20 000 to the WSSD, but that is not our real size and we've never repeated the feat'. It is not clear what Ceruti means by our real size, and one might even contest her when she says the feat was never repeated. All these however, are secondary questions. What is beyond contest is that since the WSSD the new movements have been on the retreat.

As it became clear that the movements

were struggling - the 2004 elections were the critical turning point - exhaustion and demoralisation began to set in. There were two different responses to this new situation. Some militants have risen to the challenge and are shaping their temperament in the new difficult conditions. They are now undertaking the slow and painful task of preserving and building organisations, of educating themselves in the political traditions of socialism and maintaining a healthy suspicion and even hostility to the new neo-liberal order and those who mediate its acceptance among the masses - including the leading group in Cosatu.



On the other hand there are the 'old Lefts'. How do they respond to the new difficult period? Well, they go fishing. They go looking for a quick fix to resolve the difficult problems of the current historical period. For the difficult task of forging new programmes and demands, they fish for the Freedom Charter. For the difficult task of building new organisations under new conditions they go fishing for Cosatu, and hope that it will have ready-made solutions to their difficulties.

Against the task of constructing new means of communicating to the masses and to the militants, they run after the *Mail and Guardian*, and lament when the new movements are no longer a fashionable item of commerce. They mistake the regime of the ANC in power with the regime of the National Party of the 1980s. They fail to see that having swallowed the NP, the ANC will be a much harder nut to crack - and that it will not be enough to find a new UDF as a counter-power to the ANC.

The fixation with Cosatu, and with the

new UDF, is a product of the political demoralisation of the 'old Lefts'.

In his address to Cosatu's 10 Years of Democracy Conference, Desai argued that Cosatu members know what needs to be done, but they do not know how it is to be done. He referred to this dilemma as 'strategic exhaustion'.

But it is the solutions Desai puts forward in order to resolve this "strategic exhaustion" of the Cosatu member that is revealing: it gives us another idea of why the 'old Lefts' are gravitating towards Cosatu.

According to Desai, '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 coordinated huge annual income strike'. Unlike the normal wage strike, this strike would be directed against the government, and according to him 'protest action to obtain a rise from government is, if done properly, far easier. One of the reasons is that the boss does not rely on the workers voting for him. ... Not only are the people employed at a particular factory activated, but grandparents, schoolchildren, the unemployed and workers wherever they work, are thrown into action.'

The most striking thing about the 'solution' Desai advances is how similar it is to the politics of the Left in the 1980s, and how it is a repeat of the politics that led the Left to 'miss the boat' when the uprising in the 1980s grew and intensified.

The old Lefts are looking for organisations that could fulfil the kind of role they dreamed of in the 1980s. It is for this reason that we see, among some Lefts a fixation with the 'party' completely out of proportion or synch with the present historical period. The problem, of course, is that the party seems as remote today as it was in the 1980s, and so, (again a form of despair) Cosatu now substitutes.

You see, if it is 'captured', Cosatu provides the 'resources', the 'national links', the 'macroeconomic understanding' that makes it possible to run the revolution.

*This is an edited version of a paper written by Lehulere who is the director of Khanya College.*