

South African unions are **not in a crisis**

*In recent months a number of Cosatu affiliates have come under the spotlight by the media creating the impression that a crisis exists within the labour movement. **Gwede Mantashe** explores this issue and argues that there are problems but a crisis does not exist.*

Over the past six months the *City Press* has run a theme that various unions are led by corrupt leaders who enjoy high living standards and that the unions are in financial crisis. Eleven articles were written on the NUM (excluding two responses by the NUM itself), a number of articles were written on Nehawu, one on Satawu and a derailing article on Sadtu coincided with the opening of their national congress. It is this series of articles that has imposed a duty on me to respond.

What worries many activists about these articles is that freedom of the press is being equated to freedom of distorting facts and reluctance to balance stories. A small faceless group within a union sends an article to the media. Close to the deadline, the union is asked to respond. The official response is captured in one or two sentences. The detailed response of the union hardly finds its way into the newspaper column. This behaviour has taught us many lessons as a relatively young leadership.

Let me start by accepting that unions like any other organisation do have problems. They do not have the resources that the state or capital has

at their disposal. They are expected to engage as an equal partner, with equal effectiveness, with both the state and capital. In most instances, unions do not fail in that engagement. In some instances, shortcomings do show. I have concluded that trade unions are efficient. They are capable of doing the best with the least. We have succeeded as trade unions, in identifying, developing and deploying talent where business cannot. This includes individuals who have been recruited by government, business and non-governmental organisations after gaining experience and being developed by the unions. Every general secretary of any Cosatu affiliate has come through the ranks as a shopsteward – a seldom acknowledged fact. These former shopstewards are today running unions successfully. Every union is preoccupied by its ability to develop sufficient reserves for its long-term survival and growth.

Servicing members effectively

The investment in the development of intellectual capital of shopstewards is directed at delivering quality service at branch level. The success of the various unions differs, but almost all

the Cosatu unions pay attention to this area of work. The federation has forced the unions to conduct regular organisational review exercises. In these processes, we uncover our weaknesses. One example is the much-publicised NUM forensic audit report. Those who want to see unions sink, run a series of articles without acknowledging that unions are at work improving their operations. Our work at improving our own operations is projected negatively instead of being seen as a serious introduction of scientific management of working class organisations.

Key problems facing the unions

The main problem facing unions is that they are victims of their own successes. The successful implementation of 'one industry one union' principle has translated into big unions. The size of a union determines the resource base. Both the size of membership and the big (relative) resource base require a more sophisticated managerial capacity in the unions. In most instances, unions take too long to develop required capacity to deal adequately with this reality.



The second problem is the relative youthfulness of the leadership with a big pool of shopstewards who have never tested the brutality of state machinery. These young leaders of our movement find it easy to volunteer and give information to intelligence operatives, most of whom are our old comrades. These comrades believe the myth that 'this is our intelligence'. We must now deal with infiltration that is more complicated than ever before. This infiltration feeds to what Marx describes as 'revolution ready to devour its own children'. The labelling as 'ultra-left tendency', 'counter-revolutionaries', 'neoliberals', 'rightwing' is a direct product of a comrade spying on a comrade. Based on this intelligence information, readiness to destroy each other is created. This makes it dangerous to be a trade union leader and calls for commitment and dedication.

The third problem emanates from the complex transition we are going through. The unions are expected not to take up sectoral issues aggressively.

When they do take up these issues they are blackmailed and accused of being 'narrow and sectorian'. That

South African unions continue to be militant is a source of irritation to the government, the state and capital. There is a desire to see unions focusing merely on shopfloor issues, in the same way as workerists were criticised for in the 1980s. Unions are accused of obstructing governance when they engage with broad socioeconomic issues. Our being vocal when we disagree with government policies opens us to attack.

The current attacks against unions by some media and their associates must be evaluated in the context of the purpose of trade union existence. It is common cause that trade unionism is an organisational expression of a collective action. This locates trade unions as exclusively a phenomenon of capitalism. For it is within a capitalist society where free market conditions exist where the majority of people are compelled to sell their labour power to a minority of owners of the means of production. This explanation further locates trade unions within the class struggle. The democratic character of trade unions depends on the voluntary commitment of its members, leaders and employed officials. Therefore, the primary characteristic of a trade union

is a democratic organisation in the class struggle minus faceless, media sources that join unions for their personal gains.

We expect no sympathy from capitalist-owned media and business and, in certain instances, trade unions will irritate the government whose policies may result in the regression of past union gains. Trade unions shall always pursue and fight for the interest of its membership and the working class at large and the contradictions between trade unions and other class forces cannot be resolved by the distortion of facts by some journalists.

Unions are not in crisis. Nevertheless, they are facing serious challenges. They have the capacity to deal with these challenges. We must, work tirelessly to continue to improve this capacity. My view is that we shall survive this current bombardment and we will grow stronger and stronger as long as we do not allow ourselves to be derailed from our noble trade union aims and objectives.

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