

Step towards unity or shuffling chairs on the deck?

In early December 2005 Fedusa, Nactu and Consawu announced their intention to merge. The unity move was chiefly commented on for its threat to Cosatu and for its importance in unifying workers from differing backgrounds. **Dinga Sikwebu** looks more deeply into the implications of the merger and concludes that most analysts have missed the point.

The decision between three of the country's four major trade union federations to merge, has set the tongues wagging. Unveiled on the eve of the Congress of South African Trade Union's (Cosatu) 20th anniversary, the Federated Unions of South Africa (Fedusa), the National

Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) and the Confederation of South African Workers Unions' (Consawu) timing held a deep irony. The federation merger to form Cosatu in 1985 had after all as its aim the goal of uniting all trade unions into a single trade union centre in South Africa.

It is therefore not surprising that immediately after the announcement, Cosatu issued a terse statement. On the one hand it warned the new federation against taking a "narrow, short-sighted position of becoming a significant rival of Cosatu", while on the other it recognised the new organisation as a potential stepping stone towards the realisation of "the historic vision of one country – one federation". Cosatu's reaction is understandable. What the Fedusa-Nactu-Consawu announcement makes clear is that 20 years later the objective of one federation remains as elusive as soap in water.

But more serious than the issue of timing, is the question of the significance of the proposed merger. More than one labour analyst has pointed to how the Fedusa-Nactu-Consawu merger significantly alters South Africa's labour landscape. At the centre of this assertion are observations of how the planned merger brings together workers from different backgrounds. It will merge a predominantly black union federation with an historically white trade union body, namely

Nactu's blue-collar workers and Fedusa's white-collar and artisanal layers.

Other commentary on the merger has centred around how the unity initiative will reduce fragmentation of South Africa's labour movement and bring about greater unity. While no one could be opposed to worker unity or question the significance of the move towards merger, comments on the about-to-be established union federation misses four crucial points.

The first point is that the bulk of the country's 365 registered unions fall outside of the four labour federations. The majority of these are small and regionally based organisations. Some are 'fly-by-nights and briefcase unions' that consultants have established in order to gain access to statutory institutions like the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA). But a significant number of non-aligned unions have been formed as a result of established unions' poor service to members. Any realignment of labour has to find a way to bring on board these smaller and unaffiliated unions. To be sustainable, such realignment must also address some of the reasons, 'poor service to members' that lead to the disenchantment and consequent proliferation of independent unions.

The second point that is missing in the analysis of the proposed