

Stopping the gravy train

'Gravy train' heading for a collision

There has been an outcry from unions and civic organisations over the Melamet Commission salary recommendations.

SACP wants Cabinet pay cut

Pay our MPs well, says union chief

Committee member speaks out

SALB writer DEANNE COLLINS enters the debate about pay scales and values in the public sector – and in society in general.

Introduction

The public furore around the salaries to be paid to public office bearers, as well as the steady exodus of staff from trade unions and other progressive organisations into government and business, emphasises the need for debate around salary packages generally and the basis on which these are determined. COSATU, NEHAWU, the SACP, SANCO and the ANC Youth League have come out strongly against the proposed salary packages for MP's and other public office bearers. The ANC itself has appointed its own investigation into the issue.

What are the politicians earning?

Table 1 below shows some

of the salary packages recommended by the Melamet Committee on Remuneration of Politicians, which have been accepted by the Cabinet.

Salaries are based on the private sector

One of the main criticisms which has been made of the salary packages is that they are

Table 1

Position	Annual Salary Package
President	R784 350
Deputy Presidents	R681 600
Regional Premiers, Cabinet Ministers	R470 400
Deputy Ministers	R372 000
MP's, National Assembly	R193 200
MP's, Provincial Legislatures	R184 800

based on salaries paid to executives in the private sector. COSATU points out that “South Africa is internationally notorious for the obscene gap which exists between workers and executives”.

A survey by the Labour Research Service of the average wages paid to directors of large South African companies shows that a “labourer” would have to work about 48 years to earn what most directors get in a year. Table 2 below shows the gap between directors pay and “labourers” wages at some South African companies.

While investigations are continuing, the members of government are receiving these amounts every month.

How do the Unions Compare?

Other articles in this issue of the SALB point to a virtual flood of all levels of staff out of the

Table 2

Company	Monthly Pay		Gap
	Directors	“Labourers”	
Engen	R 83 333	R1 846	45
ABSA	R108 333	R1 125	96
Anglo American	R 41 666	R 676	62
Murray & Roberts	R109 524	R 866	126

trade unions. Apart from those serving in government, many are going into the civil service. Still others are moving to agencies in the development or NGO sectors, while some are “crossing the line” to work for business.

One reason for this exodus is the perception that wages and working conditions in the unions are very poor.

One of the difficulties in assessing whether

Table 3

JOB CATEGORY	WAGE RANGE PER MONTH	
	UNION	NGO
General Secretary/Director	R1900 – R4100	R3152 – R12500
Head of Department	R1865 – R3395	R2406 – R 4705
Organiser/Fieldworker	R1300 – R2651	R2000 – R 4500
Administrator	R1231 – R2651	R1591 – R 2281

or not union conditions are in fact bad, is establishing which yardstick to measure them against.

Table 3 below shows the range of wages currently paid to different categories of union staff in a cross section of COSATU unions surveyed by SALB writer Zolile Mtshelwane. These are compared to comparable jobs in the NGO sector.

Most unions and NGO’s also offer additional benefits, the most common of which are medical and provident funds and transport or car allowances.

It is understood that salaries paid by parties such as the ANC and the SACP are close to those of union officials.

A shift in Attitude

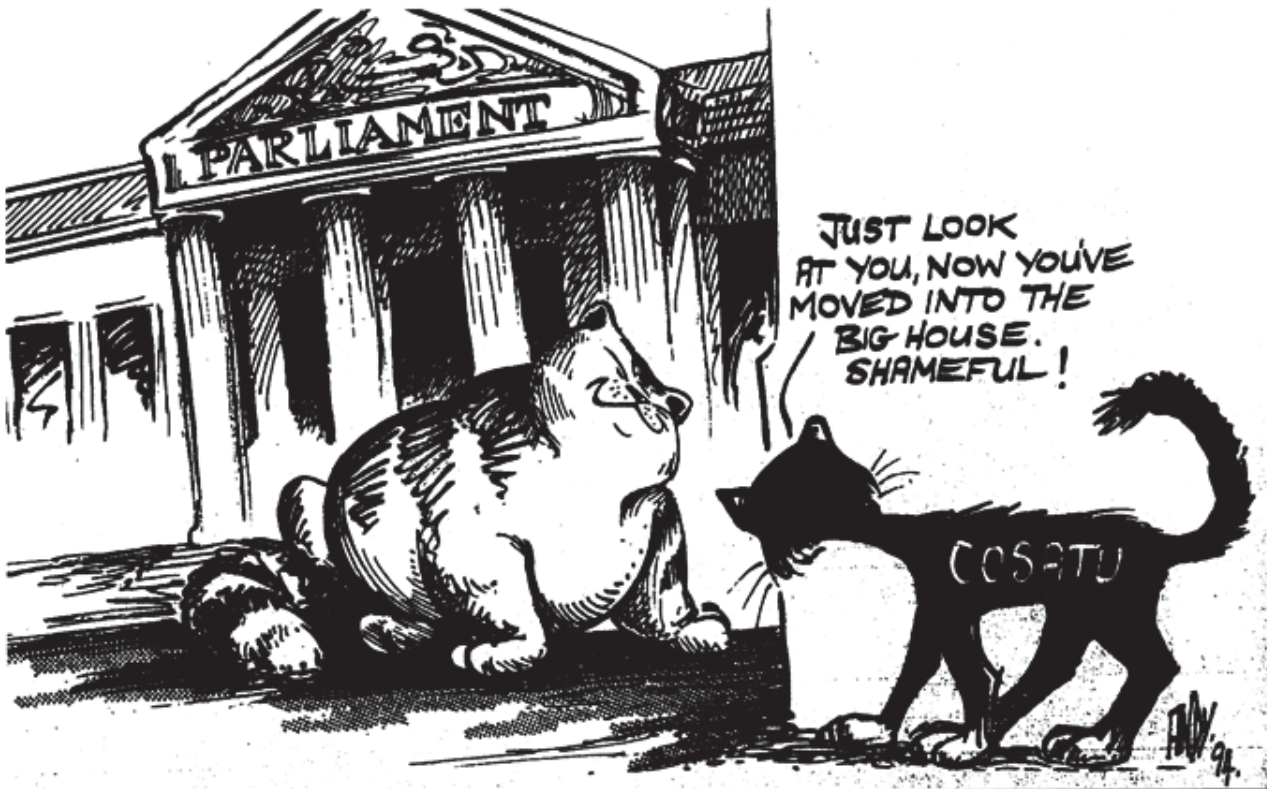
There can be no doubt that the wages and conditions of union and party officials need to be reassessed. However, the terms of reference

of this reassessment will be crucial.

There are disturbing indications that amongst certain sections of our society, which were formerly part of the

progressive movement, a significant shift in values is taking place, which the debate over politicians salaries reflects very accurately.

Condemnation of the proposed levels of pay for politicians has by no means been unanimous amongst progressive circles. The President of the NUM, who sat on the Committee which set the salaries, has publically disagreed with COSATU on the



issue, stating that his union accepts the recommended levels. It is known that a number of the ANC members of government concur.

Service or self-enrichment?

If one looks at the salaries being offered in the private sector (though only, of course, to the select few) as well as the salaries for politicians, it is clear that union officials are comparatively worse off.

This should come as no surprise. It has always been accepted that working for the Union was an act of struggle. The reward for one's work was not monetary, but the contribution that one was making to the liberation of society.

It would appear that for some, since the struggle is now over, so too, is this value system. Many "comrades" are now demanding that their services be valued in terms of entirely different criteria.

The terms of the new value system which is emerging are not unfamiliar: service in and for itself no longer has value. Service to society is replaced by a notion of individual worth which is measured in terms of the "market value" of one's skills and work. The interests of the collective are replaced by the self-interest of the individual.

With the focus on the narrow interests of the individual, it is inevitable that there will be intense competition between individuals in the scramble to secure for themselves the best "deal", without regard to the fact that this approach will generate enormous gaps between the higher and the lower rungs of the pay "ladder". Nowhere is this point better illustrated than in the case of the salaries which directors of South African companies pay themselves. This is the final absurdity – but also the inevitable conclusion – of such a value system.

Stopping the Gravy Train

In its press statement on politicians salaries, COSATU pointed out that "the main aim of public service is not self-enrichment" and called on public office bearers not to continue to ride the gravy train set in motion by their predecessors. But it is clear that the "gravy train" value system does not only operate in the public service: it can be found in all sectors of our economy.

Urgent debate is needed if we are to stop the gravy train approach from becoming the norm in our society. An essential part of this debate will be examining what kind of society we want South Africa to be and whether our struggle is, indeed, over. ☆