



Striking Back: A History of COSATU

Jeremy Baskin (Ravan Press, 1991)

*Reviewed by PAT HORN**

How the South African trade union movement grew to be what it is, has been a process only really known to those who have been directly involved in the trade union movement over the past 20 years until *Striking back: A history of COSATU*, by Jeremy Baskin, was published by Ravan Press in 1991. This book gives the reader an insider's view of the growth of COSATU, the largest, most effective and fastest-growing of South Africa's trade union federations.

Instead of the image of the monolith depicted by the media (whether monster or saviour, depending on the bias) one gains in Baskin's book an informed understanding of COSATU as an umbrella body of distinct trade unions - embracing many dynamics and tensions, strengths and weaknesses - in dialectical interaction in one complex organisation.

The first section, "Before COSATU", provides an excellent description of the dynamics in the labour movement which gave birth to COSATU. Now that COSATU is what it is, the most surprising organisations have claimed credit for creating it. But the account in this book shows the combination of organisations, personalities and political forces which formed COSATU.

1986-1987: chaotic political tensions

In the second section, "1986 - The First Year", the book attempts to analyse and explain events and political tensions in a new COSATU that was very chaotic. Some of the early difficulties facing COSATU are described, such as the formation of UWUSA by Inkatha to counter COSATU, slow progress made in the mergers between COSATU unions, and the mass dismissal of striking mine workers.

The book attempts in this section to explain early political tensions within COSATU, as different groupings tried to muscle into powerful positions in the new federation. Baskin places the affiliate unions in three broad political groupings. These are characterised as a "UDF bloc", an "independent worker bloc" and a "centre group" - consisting of NUM, FCWU, SFAWU, PPWAWU and TGWU - which is depicted as the group providing COSATU's political direction.

This is one area of the book where the author's position in PPWAWU at the time makes his analysis too subjective. The insider's perspective is what makes this book valuable, but at the same time the insider's analysis cannot be politically neutral, and the analysis of the political dynamics within COSATU is probably the weakest part of the book.

Despite an earnest attempt to provide a more nuanced political analysis, the book does not get to the bottom of the political dynamics of those early years in COSATU. The political struggles described within COSATU come out looking like they were mainly battles between

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those who were sympathetic to the UDF and the ANC and those who were not. The lines of distinction between the UDF and the ANC are blurred, and they are ultimately treated as one thing.

The book also avoids dealing with the complex dynamics (both open and not-so-open) at this time within both the ANC and SACP in exile in relation to this new and potentially threatening trade union movement.

This may be because the author considers it too sensitive an aspect to deal with so shortly after the unbanning of these organisations, but it leaves a significant gap in the political analysis. Consequently the book also does not deal with the intense and critical struggle for trade union independence successfully waged in COSATU in its early years.

The third section, "1987 - Year of Fire", deals with the year when COSATU started to take some of its first steps as a trade union federation. The scene is well set in terms of the general political climate of the time, and the book places accounts of the major strikes which took place that year against that background. The importance of the early strikes cannot be underestimated in the life of COSATU, in terms of practical lessons in testing its strength. Some of these lessons, as shown, were very costly.

The major political tensions of that year within the federation, centred mainly around whether or not to adopt the Freedom Charter - and leading to the dramatic split of CCAWUSA - are also dealt with in a way which highlights some of the dynamics which were going on in COSATU at the time. The book rather too glibly attributes the tensions and divisions of this phase to the growing pains created by the wide-ranging views which co-existed in COSATU.

What is missing is an examination of the effects in that period of widespread political intolerance: upon COSATU, upon the levels of violence in strikes, and upon the freedom of debate and dissent within COSATU and many of its affiliates.



Defence and Consolidation, and Advancing into the 1990s

The fourth section, "Defence and Consolidation", documents the consolidation of COSATU after having suffered very public setbacks in the strikes of 1987.

This section provides a rare

account of the continuing but much more low-key struggle which ensued between the state and a sobered but determined COSATU. The beginnings of the Living Wage Campaign and the anti-LRA campaign are described, giving a good idea of the nuts and bolts that have gone into what became persistent and highly effective onslaughts on capital and the state.

The book also describes COSATU's first steps in creating unity beyond its own structures as it built alliances with other organisations, targeted significant groups of unorganised workers for attention and, finally, even started to build a closer relationship with NACTU, its main rival trade union federation.

The last two sections, "Advancing" and "Into the 1990s", deal with the 1989/1990 period of COSATU's existence. The progress of important ongoing struggles is followed through, such as the anti-LRA campaign, and the resolution of the CCAWUSA split. Other themes which are very much a part of the COSATU of today, are picked up: such as COSATU's central role in peace initiatives, the question of a negotiated political settlement, and COSATU's role in the changing political scene. This section also goes into some of the issues which were debated at COSATU's 1989 Congress, and upon which COSATU was able to develop clear working-class positions.

Position of women

The book has the welcome distinction of devoting a whole chapter to a critical analysis of the position of women and the struggles of working-class women in COSATU. It describes the ways in which women workers have been able to take up gender issues in COSATU unions: such as eliminating wage

differentials, introducing maternity and parental rights, and highlighting the problem of child care for workers in South Africa. However, it is unsparing in its criticism of COSATU as a male-dominated organisation with very low levels of female leadership and an overall unwillingness to confront sexism within its own ranks. The book poses the confrontation of this problem as part of the challenge to COSATU of building real democracy.

The book ends by summarising some of COSATU's strengths and weaknesses, and posing some of the challenges the federation will have to address in the 1990s.

Successful factual account but falls short on political analysis

Overall, the book provides an excellent and comprehensive factual account of the first five years of COSATU's development. As the equally comprehensive factual account of trade union movement by Steve Friedman* stops short of this period, Baskin's book fills an important gap. However, it attempts to provide both a factual account and a political analysis, and while it achieves the former, it falls short on the latter.

The picture of the South African political situation into which COSATU emerged and upon which it impacted, and of the "repression (which) runs like a thread through the union movement's history" (p.447) is well drawn. But, as indicated above, the book does not provide a convincing analysis of the struggles and changing balance of forces within COSATU during this period, which shaped the changing overall responses of COSATU to the political climate within which it found itself.

COSATU's evolution as a political force has been the product of a changing balance of power between COSATU's affiliate unions. Their relative power to influence politics in COSATU was determined by such factors as their relative size, and more importantly, their ability to call out their membership on mass actions such as stay-aways, public demonstrations, overtime bans, etc.

For example, the vast numerical superiority of the NUM within COSATU in 1985-1987 made the miners' union the most powerful affiliate in the federation and it was able to determine COSATU's policies on most issues at the founding Congress in 1985. However, as a relatively new union, NUM repeatedly embarrassed COSATU in those early years by failing to get mineworkers to participate in national stay-aways, and only later developed the ability to mobilise its members in mass actions as it consolidated its organisational strength.

On the other hand, the ability of what is called the "independent worker" unions to mobilise their members to participate in mass actions gave them a powerful ability to determine when and how COSATU should participate in mass action. This, together with a change in relative numerical power as a result of retrenchments in the mining industry and union mergers in the metal and textile sectors, shifted to an open struggle between NUM and NUMSA over COSATU's political position at the 1987 Congress. Then there came a further shift to a different dispensation including a firm NUM-NUMSA alliance which decided most issues at the 1989 COSATU Congress.

The way in which the book identifies three groupings within COSATU based on largely ideological criteria, creates the impression that the political struggles within the federation were purely ideological in nature. Affiliates' positions appear either static or, in the case of the "centre group", steering a fine balance between the other static ideological positions. The book creates the impression that COSATU arrived at political positions purely as a rational result of internal airing of differing positions, instead of through political power struggles which ultimately determined issues and policies on the basis of relative strength on the ground.

While the work of documenting the growth of COSATU during this period has been admirably done in this book, a comprehensive analysis of COSATU as an independent working-class political force has yet to be undertaken. ❖

* *"Building Tomorrow Today: African Workers in Trade Unions 1970 - 1984"*