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Allan Horwitz\* argues that too much emphasis on accommodating employers, a reformist approach to politics, and the growth of a union bureaucracy, are contributing to the weakening of the union movement.

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# Supping *with* **SACCOLA**

**B**obby Marie's excellent article (*SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 16 No 5) traces the problems that a massive increase in membership and a changing political situation have created for the unions. His points are, I believe, accepted by most comrades as accurate and insightful. However, we must also address dimensions he has not touched in order to broaden our understanding and, in so doing, deal effectively with the problems of accountability, efficiency and the implementation of political and economic programmes that really empower and improve the lives of the millions of exploited and impoverished.

These dimensions are:

- COSATU's role in South Africa at this specific point in our history;
- COSATU's role, in the light of the

experience of other African trade unions both during and after liberation;

- COSATU's future in the light of international trade union experience.

What follows constitutes a number of brief reflections and makes no claim to exhaustiveness. It is intended to add to the growing debate in a spirit of openness.

## **Losing our revolutionary energy**

My point of departure is that the revolutionary energy and optimism which characterised COSATU from its birth is being moderated and institutionalised. COSATU leadership seems convinced by our alliance partners that there is no alternative but to make a 'deal' with capital and Afrikaner nationalism. This 'deal' will leave the lion's share of power and control

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in their hands.

In keeping with this perspective, COSATU has failed to seriously address the economic crisis (the massive rise in unemployment, casualisation, real reduction of living standards) and the wave of terror and violence unleashed by the fascists in the bantustans and the state apparatus. Instead, we waited for CODESA to achieve 'liberation'. The result has been the stillborn Stop Retrenchment Campaign; refusal, once again, to co-ordinate the Living Wage Campaign (how long will metal and mining wage negotiations continue in isolation from each other?); inability to enforce the Laboria Minute (farm, domestic and public sector workers still do not have rights); and a National Economic Forum which is still talking generalities.

In every sector we are on the defensive as the bosses engage in a systematic and unprecedented restructuring of the economy on their terms. Their central objective is to restore the rate of profit irrespective of the human cost. Their ancillary objectives are to create a labour aristocracy (productive, stable and relatively secure, headed by a 'reasonable' COSATU leadership) and a black political class to anchor and defend the system.

It is an 'open' secret that many affiliates (or rather their CEC representatives) were dismissive of the proposed week of action, saying workers were tired of stayaways. If, in fact, there was hesitation by workers on the ground it was because of the vacillation of the leadership preceding the General Strike. COSATU leadership was prepared to 'switch off' weeks of mobilisation because SACCOLA (or rather, Anglo and its allies) was considering signing a document which, in any event, would not have been binding on the state.

The COSATU leadership, in its hurry to support the ANC leadership's narrow political ambitions, has forgotten the lessons workers have learnt, at great cost and suffering, over the years. Surely we have learnt from the bitter experience of the Laboria Minute? How many undertakings in that document have been



violated? The unreliability of employers should make us wary of loose agreements, lacking tight monitoring mechanisms.

In any event, the week of mass action in August was a massive show of resistance and solidarity. It has yet again placed the regime on the defensive. It remains to be seen if the follow-up (controlled by the same leadership that almost watered down that action to nothing) delivers real results.

### More mass action needed

It is clear that the longer this government remains in power, the more violence will continue and the harsher the economic crisis will grow. Our experience tells us that *more*, rather than less, mass action will facilitate the end of this regime. Only radical action *now* can stop the restructuring on capital's terms and inspire and energise the working-class for the extremely hard road that lies ahead. International experience suggests the alternative "development path" (*a la* World Bank, IMF and Anglo) will not advance the interests of the broader working class.

Only the working-class itself can carry forward a programme which really addresses poverty and deprivation. The COSATU leadership has failed to act on this knowledge. We rely on developing relations with SACCOLA rather than prioritising unity in action with other working-class organisations, such as NACTU.

### Accountability and negotiations

The problems of accountability start with a leadership (in COSATU and also in the affiliates) which is starting to take liberties with mandates and cut corners to fit in with alliance policy. When Jay Naidoo speaks on television of a "government of national unity" (a concept which, to my knowledge, has no basis in COSATU policy), the warning lights start flashing ...

The corporate controlled press is full of articles about the need for elites to 'deliver' their constituencies. It will be tragic if a figure as central to our history as Comrade Mandela



should be seen to settle for a 'deal' which does not have the support and full authority of the South African people he represents. In any event, COSATU should not do the same.

Its role in representing broad working-class interests must not be compromised.

The central features of any negotiation should be the interplay between the mandated



unless we want 'progress' Korean or Taiwanese style - ie another dose of dictatorship. Whites need to know in clear, programmatic terms what this will mean and to understand that

raising black living standards is the key ingredient for the building of a non-racial, democratic society.

The South African working-class has an

opportunity to change the course of African history by taking control of an industrial society that has access to enormous resources and to develop them for the good of those who produce.

The failure of the Economic Trends Group (established by COSATU as an economic think-tank) to produce any original thinking for a socialist way forward is an indictment of the progressive intelligentsia. The tragedy is that COSATU seems to have remained captive to their thinking - to assumptions discredited by the reality



*More, rather than less, mass action will facilitate the end of this regime"*

*Photo: Shariff*

'bottom-lines' of the parties and the balance of forces - the real, not imagined, levels of organisation, consciousness and resources. The quality and commitment of leadership is the unspoken factor which holds the framework together. It seems strange that at this hour of crisis, COSATU has not urged the alliance to convene a national meeting of all progressive forces to establish the 'bottom-line' and create a balance of forces favourable to the liberation movement.

### **Real economic change**

Real change in South Africa must entail a massive reallocation of resources from the white middle-class (and especially big business) to the black working-class. It is dishonest to suggest there is any other way,

of increasing Third World poverty and deprivation.

### **International and African experience**

In looking for a way forward, we should evaluate the historic role of trade unions in emerging, independent Africa. The lessons are instructive, particularly in the case of Zimbabwe and Namibia, where the unions constituted the back-bone of mass mobilisation (apart from military/guerilla struggle).

In both cases, independence resulted in the down-playing of the unions' influence. In Zimbabwe there was an attempt, by a 'popular and radical' government, to dismantle the independent unions and replace them with government organs. In Namibia, progressive labour law is stalled and the unions have been



told to accept that 'reconciliation' means leaving the economy under the control of the private sector.

These, and many other experiences, show that formal alliances of trade unions with political organisations representing the oppressed, have only resulted in the subordination of working-class interests to 'national interest'. Massive inequalities and cultural conservatism have been left untouched. Lack of democratic practice in the political parties has resulted in an over-concentration of power in the hands of internal groupings susceptible to corruption.

All over Africa, it has taken an entire generation to begin to challenge such elites. When the Namibian government spends R90m on an executive jet for Comrade Nujoma, and Zimbabwean cabinet ministers enrich themselves buying land allocated for peasants - what happens to workers' perceptions of their unions which remain entangled with such practices? Allegations that Lonrho has bought Comrade Tambo a R3m house suggest a similarly disturbing pattern and have yet to be satisfactorily explained.

### **The problem of bureaucracy**

Internationally, unions have always emerged to challenge industrialising capitalist classes that pursued accumulation through super-exploitation. This happened in England over a century ago. And it happened in South Africa in the 1920s and again in the '70s, despite the smashing of open political opposition to apartheid. However, as the political position of the leadership changed to accept and work within the framework of wage labour, rather than to attempt to smash it, so a bureaucracy emerged with its own interests and agenda - at all levels of trade union organisation.

This process is now beginning to develop in South Africa. As the revolutionary aspect of our struggle gives way to working with and accommodating the bosses, so national worker office-bearers, organisers and national negotiating teams (at company and sectoral level) learn a new language and new values -



those of the dominant ruling class.

Revolutionary 'sacrifice and dedication' give way to demands from union officials for provident funds, medical aid, housing loans

and so on. Of course union officials have the right to security and a decent wage. But when this results in increasing internal wage gaps, multiplying job grades and introducing merit increases (as SACCAWU and many other unions have done), one has to wonder how this will affect performance and service to members. In many unions, the secretariat is becoming more and more hierarchical, with special benefits and privileges for general secretaries. The consciousness of collective work is giving way to the authority of the 'director'. Can lessening equality re-invigorate a working-class organisation?

Despite the massive increase in the size of unions and the complexity of their operation, there is no necessity for fundamental principles and practices of equality to change. I believe it has been the switch to political compromise which is at the root of the slow-down in union activity, and in some cases paralysis, in giving effect to many important resolutions and campaigns.

The immediate future of COSATU as an independent working-class organisation is not particularly positive given the growing tendencies to emasculate mandates, subordinate worker demands, rely on 'negotiation' even when the battle has not been won on the ground, and the growing material and status requirements of the bureaucracy. However, I am not pessimistic because workers have repeatedly shown their courage and willingness to confront apartheid capitalism and struggle for a more democratic, equal and just society.

This is not just 'wishful thinking' or romanticisation. All over Africa the process of regeneration is beginning. Surely here, with the largest, most organised working-class on the continent, we can still avoid the errors made elsewhere. ☆