

# The movement's new unity

**T**he new century may herald a new era for the worker movement – a long phase of development where elusive unity is at last grasped to a far greater degree than ever before. Signs of change are now evident.

A small but significant part of this historic shift is the creative international role COSATU has chosen to play. In October this year, COSATU will host a regional conference that brings together independent unions from Asia, Australia, Southern Africa and Latin America. The conference will be held under the banner of SIGTUR – a proposed new regional trade union formation.

## **COSATU's vision**

A decade ago, Jay Naidoo, the then general secretary of COSATU, argued that 'southern' unions should unite to develop a new trade union internationalism. Consequently, COSATU committed itself to an initiative bringing together independent unions from Asia, Australia and Southern Africa. After the founding conference of the Indian Ocean Initiative in May 1991, Zwelinzima Vavi (COSATU's then assistant general secretary) and Bangumzi Sifingo (COSATU's international secretary) played an important role in advancing this international action.

Vavi was a delegate at the 1991 and 1992 conferences. His creative interventions led to a more effective

*Rob Lambert highlights what delegates at the upcoming Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights (SIGTUR) conference will grapple with.*

---

structuring of the work when he helped establish a Regional Co-ordinating Committee. Vavi and Sifingo also strengthened and stabilised the work through seeking a common policy position with Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). This was achieved at a bilateral meeting in December 1996. COSATU resolved to host the 5<sup>th</sup> conference of this initiative.

## **Deepening solidarity**

From the very early phase of its formation, the worker movement experienced capitalism as a force unconstrained by national boundaries. Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century analysis of the change resonates in the final year of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: 'The need for a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. All old-established industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new



industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question'.<sup>1</sup>

The embryonic worker movement sought to challenge this socially destructive market logic. The initial contacts between English and French workers confronted a common 19<sup>th</sup> Century practice where bosses brought lower paid workers from Europe to England to break strikes. Aleader of the London Trades Council, one of the early union co-ordinating bodies, proposed the following solutions: 'regular and systematic communication between the industrious classes of all countries'.<sup>2</sup>

Despite this promising start, political division fatally undermined worker internationalism for the past 150 years. However, the present phase of globalisation, ideologically so similar to mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century capitalism described above, has, ironically, created a great opportunity to forge a vibrant, powerful internationalism, the likes of which has not been witnessed before.

There are significant signs that this is no romantic dream. At every level now, unions and workers are sweeping aside past political and ideological differences and uniting on their most important goals – the assertion of worker rights, the rebuilding of a strong movement, the challenging of a socially destructive logic of pure market relations now cutting through all nations.

Whereas, unions previously perceived new initiatives as a threat to existing structures, they now view new initiatives as complementary and enhancing of the movement more generally. Every level of the movement is finding new ways of uniting around a common cause. Each is moving together to build where unionism is weak and under threat.

Unions are developing innovative campaigns to assert worker rights. Unions are formulating alternatives to Japanese

styled workplace restructuring initiatives. Notions of 'south' and 'north' are no longer divisive, but seen as expressive of necessary responses to the shifts and contours of global economic change. In this process 'northern' and 'southern' unions work together in exposing and resisting the logic of global companies constantly chasing cheaper labour.

Workplace-community divides are dissolving as unions and community movements form alliances in common campaigns for democracy and participation; for work justice, for the environment and for the empowerment of citizens now marginalised by the corporate power machine.

### **New global union agenda**

Unions everywhere have been enticed into new roles by the language of globalisation: restructure, change, become competitive, adopt world's best practice, build the nation, save jobs, free trade equals opportunity for all, grow the global economy and wealth will abound for all.

Workers' experiences of this change process have generally, without exception, been devastating. Jobs are continuously being lost before the chainsaw of downsizing, outsourcing, casualising transformation. Basic union rights are challenged in all but a few countries. Material conditions worsen for the majority, whilst a minority revels in unimaginable wealth. Uncertainty and anxiety stalk daily, eating away at the spirit and soul of the working majority. As Eric Hobsbawn observes, globalisation has produced, 'tense, mistrustful, anxiety-haunted societies'.<sup>3</sup> Everywhere the environment is plundered in the name of development, progress, profit. Politicians side with minority corporate interests, veiled by statements of their commitment to the nation's general interest.



Recognition has grown that this is a pathway to destroying the wellbeing of working people. We have to develop constructive, positive alternatives. The October meeting is one step down the road of global solidarity. Participating unions are saying, 'We know what globalisation is doing to us. Let us talk about what we can do to rebuild our base. Let us move from defensive actions to an offensive strategy, winning back what we have lost'. The conference will capture this shift in unions' thinking when it grapples with the following issues that will set the union agenda:

- ☐ reviewing remarkable solidarity action against the market logic of globalisation;
- ☐ rebuilding the union base;
- ☐ creating global social movement unionism;
- ☐ global campaigning;
- ☐ creating a unified image of the movements' vision of society;
- ☐ what is a union – work organisation or community in movement?

### Remarkable solidarity action

The conference will begin with a review of the actions of the Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU) against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led drive to do away with life-time employment in Korea. KCTU organised mass strikes against the move. Hyundai workers occupied their workplaces, threatening to blow the buildings apart if the military attempted to remove them. The actions of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) in its fight against de-unionisation, and the all India strikes against globalisation will also set the tone of the entire conference.

These actions show that the ideology that markets decide what is best for working people may dominate globally, but, in the longer term, they have not necessarily won the day. The 'history has ended' proclamation may be somewhat

premature. A culture of solidarity may be under attack, but it is nevertheless alive, vibrant and capable of blocking the way markets are breaking down community and conditions. The review of solidarity action in some countries will serve as an example for others. This positive spirit of resistance will inform all reviews and action planning.

### Rebuilding the union base

Unions everywhere have been destroyed by capital's chase across the globe. Restructuring has disconnected unions as companies relocate and downsize their workforces. The conference will provide a forum for delegates to exchange their experiences of how unions are responding to this challenge.

How are unions fighting to retain full-time employment? (Korea is an obvious example. Here the conference is important because KCTU is saying they cannot continue along this path on their own. Inside Korea they are being challenged by business and government saying: 'Look, unions in other countries are not being as inflexible as you are. They are accepting the need for competitive arrangements'.)

How are unions tracking and re-organising casualised workers?

### Global unionism

The radical nature of global restructuring and the high mobility of capital requires a global unionism. Moves are now in place to forge sector-to-sector links across specific countries to trial run global unionism. Linkages through personnel exchanges will transmit national experiences. This will help create a readiness to act in the cause of workers in other countries for these workers will now be represented inside the collaborating union, working to raise the awareness levels. "





Pic: Rob Lambert

*Delegates at the inaugural conference, Perth, May 1991.*

When Australian leaders visited the Durban docks in South Africa to personally thank workers for their boycott actions, there was a high demand for T-shirts and other symbols. These one-off meetings are valuable. Shared experience creates a real sense of international solidarity. The fact that Australian workers travelled across the Indian Ocean to say thank you had an impact. However, these positive acts do not create a global unionism. For this to happen, structural links with a degree of permanence have to be formed. Certain unions are already in the process of reviewing the form of this change and this will be considered at the conference.

Unions that are presently leading global campaigns against multi-nationals have found it essential to turn outwards and form community alliances. The multi-national mining giant that is attacking worker rights in Australia in the name of individual freedom is the same company that is cutting into Malagasy's ancient forests to mine sand. The interests of green groups and unions

overlap. As the MUA discovered, battles cannot be won without workers and the community standing shoulder to shoulder on the picket lines. The conference will explore the mechanics of these strategic shifts. The outcome will be the first building blocks of a global social movement unionism – not as an abstract theoretical idea, but as a concrete organisational shift worked through in all its detail.

### **Global campaigning**

No genuine unionist disagrees with the concept of global solidarity. However, practically, it is very difficult to achieve. This conference will seek to avoid that pitfall by focusing on limited objectives that can be acted upon and achieved.

One proposal is that unions take the international campaign the Australian mining union has been waging against the mining giant, Rio Tinto, on board. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) is keen to strategise the next steps in the campaign. The extent to



which this campaign can be progressed will be the extent to which the tools of global campaigning will be sharpened.

## Unified vision of society

In the early phase of the labour movement's existence, unions won widespread support because they expressed a vision of an alternative, more equal and just society. Unions expanded when this vision was strong and declined when the vision was weak.

Important sections of the union movement are now opposed to globalisation in its present form. We must highlight this opposition. We must fire-up the imagination of citizens trapped in globalisation's seemingly iron logic. The conference will explore ways of achieving this. KCTU suggests that we identify a key focus for May Day and organise for the movement to synchronise May Day rallies across the region.

## Community building

We will be striving to achieve all the above at the conference. However, there are also less tangible outcomes. A good conference is a community and movement building experience. To be effective, unions have to become more than mere organisations in the workplace, enmeshed in complex state legal systems, active only when the next wage round is fought, or when there is some dispute. Defending working conditions is central of course, but unions can encompass more than this. Unions will consolidate and expand to the extent that they represent communities and civilised humane values in a world where all values except efficiency have all but vanished.

Good conferences are community-building experiences. Over the past ten years, strong enduring relationships between leaders across many nations have been forged. There are memories of

vigorous debate into the early hours, the singing and dancing, but above all, the recognition of what these leaders had endured for the worker cause. The Malaysian electronics worker, who was a key leader in a strike against a large US multi-national, wept when she explained the forms of victimisation they endure. The Indonesian artist who went to the aid of a woman worker harassed by the police. He was so badly beaten and his leg broken in so many places that he remains severely disabled. The stories are told. A movement with a sense of value is built.

The regional conference that will take place in South Africa will strive to realise these goals. The meeting is an excellent opportunity to renew a sense of shared vision, a sense of what we are struggling for. COSATU grew out of a proud tradition of resistance in South Africa. A vision of a future, socially just South Africa drove many to make deep sacrifices. These sacrifices became the motor of something special. The struggle was for a new society, not for simply rotating the faces of those in power.

The unique opportunity of hosting so many labour leaders from situations where workers and their organisations endure the most vicious attacks against their right to exist, is likely to renew that sense of struggle that has made the South African labour movement one of the most powerful and visionary in today's globalised world, where everything is measured, but nothing valued. ★

## Notes

1. *Communist Manifesto, Selected Works, Vol 1* pp109-110, 1997 edition, Progress Publishers.
2. Fernbach, David (1974), *The First International and After*, London, Penguin.
3. *The Guardian Weekly*, 30/6/1996

---

*Rob Lambert is a South African sociologist working in Australia. He is a member of the Labour Bulletin editorial board.*