

the **name** *of the* **game** *is* **membership**

Too much debate about politics and too little organisational work are weakening COSATU, warns COSATU organising secretary ZWELINZIMA VAVI.*

Few readers will disagree with Bobby Marie's in-depth analysis in the article 'COSATU faces crisis' (SA Labour Bulletin Vol 16 No 5). I fully agree with his assessment of the crisis.

I wish to broaden and deepen the discussion. The views expressed here are therefore mine, not necessarily COSATU's.

The crisis facing COSATU is mainly a consequence of the changed political situation and the growth of the organisation. There are many other contributing factors with which Bobby Marie dealt with, but certainly living under apartheid rule and the negative results of this, like high levels of illiteracy, is a major factor.

In the early period of the establishment of trade unions in South Africa, issues were fairly straightforward and simple. Organisers spent 90% of their time recruiting members, defending jobs, fighting unfair employment practices and dismissals and building effective organisation. The organisers were 200% committed to the cause and eager not only to defend their members' jobs at the factory level but to fight the entire system of oppression. Once recruited, members were as bitter and

fought as hard against the overall system of oppression as the organisers. They understood the only way to get rid of both exploitation and oppression was unity and continued struggle.

Today that is no longer the case. As the political situation unfolds things will simply become worse.

Commitment to fight

Workers then were angrier than they are now. Stories of bitter wars of dispossession, told to them by their grandfathers, were still ringing in the minds of most black workers when they started jobs. The tales of how their grandfathers and mothers were forced out of their land to work in the gold mines and develop cities aggravated by their own brutal treatment by the managers and baas boys. Assaults and physical punishments were the order of the day in most mines, factories and shops.

Little wonder that there was such a strong commitment to fight exploitation and defend one another. Slogans like "*Organise or Starve*" and "*Unity is Strength*" were rooted in the minds of each and every worker.

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The changed situation has been dealt with by other comrades who have contributed to the discussion.

Today we have bosses wielding ANC membership cards and a smiling state president on television shaking hands with black people. The bosses and the state have realised it was a serious mistake to treat black workers as they did in the past. Now their strategy is to smile while they continue with the attacks on workers' living standards and political rights.

Today workers are lazy to attend meetings, discuss and plan strategies. Discussions about strategy which formerly took place in filthy toilets have been replaced by discussions about soccer matches which take place in well-kept canteens.

Now organisers spend 90% of their time reading papers, reading countless reports and minutes from countless structures, attending countless internal meetings, preparing press statements and phoning or faxing papers to the head office. Only 10% of their time is spent recruiting, holding general meetings, distributing pamphlets and solving workers' problems. The result is a deteriorating organisational capacity.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

Building strong organisation is the key
Despite the smiles and nice talk, there are still retrenchments, unemployment, low wages, high food prices, privatisation, lack of houses, deregulation, poverty, diseases, lack of clean water, lack of land and lack of political rights.

More than one million workers have been organised. But there are two and half million unorganised workers in the farms, public sector and construction industry.

Instead of discussing how to organise farm workers or how to counter the undermining of worker control in our unions, COSATU structures have spent the last two years concentrating on discussing CODESA and related political issues. It has become a tradition to place issues like weakness of affiliates and regions at the bottom of the agenda and to start with the "current political



Photo: William Matlala

situation, briefing and discussions".

Certainly COSATU and the trade union movement has contributed to the changed political situation through many years of sacrifice. It is natural for members to be interested in political events. One is not arguing against the holding of political discussions but against their being held at the expense of the organisation and its principal task.

We need to change this. Unless we begin to spend most of our time discussing the weaknesses of our factory, local, regional and national structures and the areas of potential development, our gains will soon disappear.

COSATU must grow

The latest statistics show no growth in COSATU membership. Despite massive retrenchments and dismissals, COSATU should have grown massively in this period. Some three million workers participated in the 4-5 November 1991 VAT general strike. We estimated more than four million workers took part in the recent 3-4 August peace and democracy strike. Quite clearly those workers, who participated - in the face of dismissals - identify with our goals. So why have they not joined our unions?

Every time we assess a major strike, we say rural and small town workers are thirsty for our organisation. How do we intend to organise them? These questions disappear after every successful action, reappear when there is another action and then disappear again. But we have certainly been playing lip service to such crucial questions. Otherwise, there would have been an answer from the membership, shopstewards, organisers or the leadership.

When we assessed the VAT, Inkathagate and National Party corruption we said COSATU does not and should not concern itself only with issues affecting its membership, but should also vigorously take up broader issues. Certainly we profited from this approach. But beside the good public profile and image we have created, what have we achieved? Our membership has not increased.

Our influence in social, economic and political matters depends on the significance of our constituency. The name of the game is membership. Without it you can scream as loud as you can, but nobody will listen to you.

Today we talk of organisers battling to keep up with the pace of workers demanding to be signed up as members of COSATU. However, workers join unions because they deliver the goods — not because they are affiliated to COSATU, which has a good public image and history of fighting against apartheid.

In the future, when the political situation has been 'normalised', it may be extremely difficult to organise workers into trade unions. There will be no anger against apartheid and its

evils. That is going to be a shadowy story. Workers may be more conservative. They will be interested in standing for elections as councillors and mayors and even cabinet ministers.

An effective organisation must be built now. There will be no chance in the future.

WORKERS CONTROL

Comrades Bobby Marie and Rob Rees talk of the principle of worker control becoming more and more a slogan that is not practised. This is relatively true. We need to look at each level of our structures to see what is going on.

Factory level

Ten years ago all the organiser had to do to get an issue discussed was to get hold of one worker or shopsteward. By the next day every member in the factory was aware of and would have discussed the issue. Shopstewards and members were not allowed to receive calls and faxes were not even a dream. Today, many shopstewards have access to a telephone and fax machine. Yet the members' grasp of union issues is not comparable to what it was ten years ago.

Then shopstewards were not permitted to be seen drinking coffee with the management while workers were unaware of what they were discussing. The accountability of shopstewards to the membership was guaranteed. Now such issues have become more complex.

It is no longer as simple as calling a wild cat strike against the kicking on the buttocks by the "voorman" or a dismissal without a hearing.

Major issues are now retrenchment and packages, restructuring, technology changes, deregulations and so on. Most strategies for fighting these complex issues are not developed by factory membership but by experts based at head offices.

Our biggest enemy in understanding these complex issues is Verwoerd's permanent rape of the living generation — illiteracy. The survey conducted for COSATU illustrates that up to 70% of our members cannot read or write. On top of that, there is just too much information in the factory coming from the

union branch office and head office.

Growing membership means you cannot translate pamphlets and reading material into the workers' languages at will. Many shopstewards are factory based and never attend local or branch shopstewards' councils because they cannot grasp the complex issues. Those who understand or have a better education occupy many positions. They are over-stretched and cannot find the time to develop fellow workers and shopstewards.

More resources should be made available for the compulsory training of shopstewards. Intense mass education programmes should be developed for membership at the factory level. More general meetings should be held to improve worker control and accountability. Lazy shopstewards who do not attend other union meetings should be cautioned and if they do not improve, replaced. Union policy should be developed in consultation with union membership. The fight of the 1980s for Adult Basic Education (ABE) in each factory should be revived. Workers and shopstewards should be encouraged to take advantage of ABE and made to understand this is the fruit of their own struggles.

Branch and regional level

A crisis in a factory often reflects a crisis in a regional or branch office. There is no tree without roots.

Our major weaknesses at this level have been co-ordination and general management skills. Newly employed organisers or elected secretaries are never trained and lack experience. Planning and prioritising is a dilemma. We need to root our branches in the factories they have organised.

Unless we make the training of new staff a priority we shall continue to have disjointed structures. We have to ensure new organisers get the experience not only through making costly mistakes, but through a systematic training programme and working alongside more experienced organisers.

Our Regional Executive Committees (REC) or Branch Executive Committees (BEC) must have their foundation in the factories and must



COSATU membership still only numbers around 1.4 m

Photo: William Matlala

represent the locals and factories. We need to promote dynamic contact between our ground and middle structures.

National level

The nerve centre or backbone of any organisation is its head office. Our major weaknesses here are similar to those at branch level. The difference is that any weakness at the national level does not have an effect limited to a small branch area but to the entire union.

Of course, most criticisms have been directed at the head offices. The main function of any head office is co-ordination. Without an effective strategy on co-ordination, there is simply no organisation. Both head office functionaries and delegates to the NEC have a duty to ensure the union acts within the principles and policies of the union.

COSATU level

The COSATU Central Executive Committee, as the highest constitutional structure after the national congress, has to set examples.

The main problem within our federation structures is the flow of information to the membership. Decisions taken by the CEC mainly find their way back through other COSATU structures. If the REC is held four weeks after the CEC, people will discuss the decisions of the CEC only then. This means the affiliates' regional delegations often have to formulate their own individual responses to the immediate issues confronting them in COSATU structures, with no mandates.

If we want to defend the principle of worker control, we cannot leave matters as they are. We need to urgently reach a situation where the majority of our members and structures know what items are on the agenda of the CEC and are waiting for the decisions. If we can achieve this, our growth is assured.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND STRENGTHS

Despite the above weaknesses, COSATU remains the best organised organisation in our country. We need to continue building on our strengths and gains.

COSATU has considerable organisational strengths which very few organisations in our country can match. The fact that COSATU has grown from about 400 000 in 1985 to more than one million shows it has become a real home for workers. The potential for more growth is there. We need to work out the best strategy to organise the more than two million farm and public sector unions and concentrate more in the rural and small establishments. If we do this, we can continue growing at the same rate.

Shopstewards

There is a 25 000-strong shopstewards' movement in COSATU which is mainly rooted in the factories, shops and mines. These shopstewards have been the real engine for growth, strength and upholding the democratic principles of the federation.

Major role players

Undoubtedly COSATU has secured its place as a major organisation in all spheres of life in our country. No cabinet minister, politician or boss

can afford to ignore COSATU.

COSATU's ability to mobilise its members in a short period and rally other organs of civil society around its programmes is known and does not need further emphasis. We have managed to make major interventions, often successfully, in economic, social and political matters that are not only of interest to our immediate constituency but to the broader society. During hard times every freedom lover in South Africa always wants to know what direction we are taking on any matter.

COSATU has successfully created a more active labour market policy. In the few years of our existence, we have managed to reverse the backward amendments which the apartheid government and bosses wanted to introduce in 1988. We have made major inroads in reshaping the National Manpower Commission, and continue to fight for the inclusion of the farm, public sector and domestic workers in the Labour Relation Act. Some of these battles are almost won.

Sustaining organisation

We have survived the worst repression ever launched by the apartheid government. COSATU was launched in the middle of the notorious National Party state of emergency. Within this brutal repression, the detentions without trial, bannings and killings, COSATU made strides and sustained its organisation until the National Party was convinced it simply could not destroy COSATU. Our organisation, albeit with the weaknesses we have discussed, is still alive.

Programmatic approach

We have a more programmatic approach in implementing our resolutions and decisions. The three-year plan COSATU adopted after its 1991 national congress has proved to be a pillar of strength in guiding our way to the next congress in 1994.

Challenges facing COSATU are to create an integrated strategy that will deepen our organisation, develop our capacity and provide muscle for our interventions at the economic, social and political level. ☆