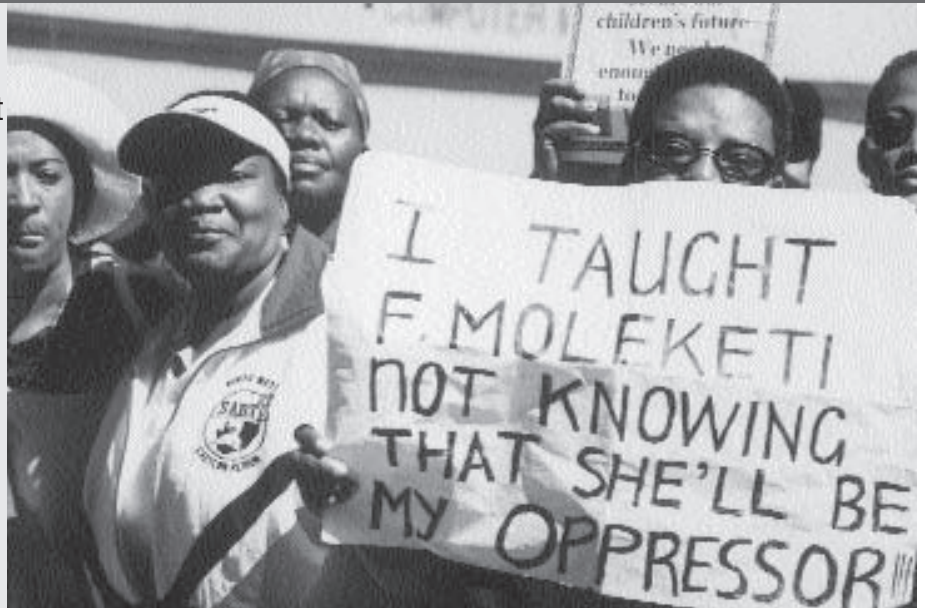


# The new face of industrial action in leadership fighting for

The recent public service wage dispute and subsequent one-day strike raises more questions than answers. **Mantombi Mtolo** takes a critical and cynical look at whether public service workers are being used by their union leaders to further their own political positions.



*Thousands of teachers took to the streets yesterday to show their frustration with the state's offer of a 5.5% pay increase - warning that a full-blown strike is imminent. Said President Mbeki: 'I don't understand why in the middle of negotiations they decided to demonstrate in the streets and abandon the classrooms'*

Pretoria News September, 3 2004.

Trade unionism in the 1990s was vibrant, politically-charged, all encompassing and energetic. The employer was seen as the representative of the illegitimate ruling party. The trade union leaders and activists were a mix of visionaries, youth, workers and academics. The fight was for a better South Africa for all. The struggle appeared simple. The simplicity, however, created an environment where leaders were forced to have a high level of analysis and strategic thinking because the vision was based on a rosy South Africa where everything would be equal and free.

We have come a long way since then. Some of the activists of the 80s have now become ministers and senior government officials (managers) who are now negotiating

on behalf of the employer against their former comrades. Managing the relationship between the legitimate and democratic government and the objectives of trade unions (organised labour) has been challenging, especially for public service unions. The environment is no longer simple. It needs more focus, better strategic thinking and a high level of engagement with the new political environment.

The tripartite alliance has created a more complex situation. It is a love/hate relationship. The politics (with a small 'p') in the labour movement is no longer much about the rights of workers. In most cases the former trade unionists (now in government) could have kicked their former labour colleagues (under

the negotiations table) when they failed to raise key and glaring issues which negatively affect their members, during negotiations for conditions of employment. In most cases these new trade unionists have failed to address certain issues even when 'they nearly beat them on their foreheads'. They seem to be somewhere else.

#### WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

Marches and strikes are no longer taking place because workers' grievances are not being met by government as employer. They take place because union leaders want to keep their political position and power within their unions. It is about how close the next elections are in the respective union and federation.

# the public service

# political survival

Negotiations for annual wage increases form part of a pre-determined set of motions which are used to mobilise, strengthen and expand membership of the union or federation. There is a public performance which speaks to members while at the same time there is a private process where real negotiations take place between the leaders from both sides. Trade unionism, it could be argued, is now about a positive relationship with the ruling party. What about the unions who are not in an alliance with the ruling party?

## WHAT HAS BEEN THE PROCESS OF NEGOTIATIONS?

Unions party to negotiations in the Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) are, in the main, either affiliated to Cosatu or Fedusa. They represent workers in different sectors such as police services, education, health and general public servants. They usually consolidate their various demands for the annual negotiations into one document and present them to the employer as 'labour demands'. The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), on the other hand, leads the employer negotiating team. The employer team will include representatives from the departments of health, education, police and correctional services. All departments will also consolidate their demands into one document, which will be referred to as 'the employer's offer'. Negotiations will often not be about matching demands and the offer in order to reach an agreement.

Rising emotions, time delays and the duration of the agreement can get in the way of this. Invariably the Cosatu-aligned unions will call for some form of action despite what has been agreed to in private. The situation could become complicated by the fact that unions within the alliance might not necessarily agree on the same strategy as the politics within each union might differ. If the leadership of a Cosatu affiliate prefers an arms

length relationship with the ANC while the other prefers a closer one, it is likely that the former will hold back and not go out on strike. This is not so much because of support for the ruling party, but rather concerns that the latter might convince members that the final agreement will not be significantly different from what was on the table before the strike. This could affect future union elections, as members will lose confidence in the ruling union leadership.

One would be stupid in failing to speculate how the relationship is managed between the alliance members. It is not really an alliance issue only. In the world of negotiations you use your relationships (informal and formal) to persuade your counterparts to agree to your demands. There are also other interventions, which can be used to bring the parties closer together. Overseas trips or study tours are also some of the mechanisms which are used to force members of negotiating parties to spend more social and 'learning' time together if they have failed to reach agreement after a long and protracted process. It is well known that the table around which negotiators sit is just a convenient tool for the signing of the final agreement while actual agreement is reached in a cigar lounge, in a suite in a soccer stadium, over lunch/dinner or on a golf course.

The alliance therefore does play a role in facilitating an agreement but the recent public service strike bears no reflection on the nature and intensity of the relationship within the alliance. It is about internal relationships within the trade union parties, the power relations and survival strategies for those in, or aspiring towards future leadership. One wonders whether members are being used in this process. I would argue that worker frustrations are real and they would be prepared to go out into the streets to vocalise and present them to the

public. However, on the part of union leaders, it is a staged performance. It is questionable whether demands are met through marches and strikes or whether they were met before such action.

Is there something new here? Not to those who have experience in negotiations of any kind, particularly the major ones, which took place to bring about democracy in this country. It is crucial, however, that scholars begin to look at worker strikes and their nature with curiosity. The parameters and the nature of negotiations have changed. The logical question is: what is the future of trade unions in addressing their obligations? Is the strategy of marching, even when an agreement has been reached, sustainable? **LE**

