

## Special focus

# From resistance to reconstruction

# The changing role of trade unions

by Karl von Holdt

The transition to democracy in South Africa is raising new challenges and new questions for the democratic trade union movement. Under apartheid the unions faced two extremely hostile enemies: the state and the employers. The unions fought hard battles to establish themselves, and learnt a range of tactics and strategies to resist both repression and co-optation. Although some areas of co-operation between business and labour did develop - they always do when there is a negotiating relationship - in general the union stance was one of 'militant abstentionism'.

This was the politics of resistance. Trade unions refused to accept responsibility for productivity,

profitability or economic growth, and rejected participating in joint projects with management. They argued that their members never saw the benefits from these processes, and that neither management nor the state were offering unions, workers or black people any real power to participate in economic decision-making.

### The politics of reconstruction

This situation is beginning to change as South Africa struggles towards democracy. The negotiation of the COSATU-SACCOLA-NACTU accord on the Labour Relations Act last year points towards a new relationship be-

tween labour and employers. The eventual acceptance by the state of this accord, the calling off of the September stayaway last year, and the participation of COSATU in the National Manpower Commission which advises the Department of Manpower, all point towards a new relation between the unions and the state.

Undoubtedly these trends will accelerate once a democratic government is in place. Organised labour is destined to become a central and very powerful social institution. In recognition of this, the trade unions are beginning to debate a new *politics of reconstruction*.

But what strategies will

the unions adopt in order to consolidate their position and influence? Their decisions now will have an enormous impact on the shape of our society, perhaps for decades to come.

### **Accord with the state, or with employers?**

We publish here a report on current thinking within the National Union of Metalworkers of SA. NUMSA's idea of a union-led national development strategy rests on the idea of a 'reconstruction accord' negotiated between trade unions, civics, rural organisations and progressive political organisations. The key player would probably be the ANC. This idea would give concrete content to the alliance between COSATU and the ANC after a democracy has been established. NUMSA thinking stresses an accord with the state through a governing party, and that such an approach could open the way to socialism.

NUMSA emphasises that this would not compromise union independence. The ANC and the unions do not necessarily have the same economic views, and the process of reaching agreement on an accord would itself involve a struggle. The unions would have to maintain their militant independence.

We also publish a paper by SACTWU general secretary John Copelyn. He argues for complete independence from the state and political parties. He argues that the unions should put all

their effort into establishing and strengthening centralised collective bargaining structures. These would provide an independent base for unions to influence society and the state. Copelyn tends to portray the future state as neutral in the conflict between business and labour.

Copelyn argues that unions will influence society through collective bargaining with employers. He suggests negotiating a series of agreements with employers, not only on traditional collective bargaining issues such as wages and conditions, but on a range of broader social and economic issues: economic growth, investment, international trade, training and education, labour legislation, etc.

Once agreement has been reached on these issues with employers, they and the unions could together approach the government and argue for them to be implemented. As Copelyn points out, the model for this bipartite approach is the COSATU-SACCOLA-NACTU negotiations over the LRA.

The NUMSA thinking envisages the reverse process: unions would approach the ANC and negotiate an accord (together with civic and rural organisations). Such an accord would be implemented partly through the state and partly through mass organisations in civil society. The organisations which are party to the accord would then have to approach business and negotiate with it on the basis of the accord.

NUMSA believes employers do not have the vision to bargain voluntarily with unions over broad social and economic issues. Nor do employers have a convincing vision for economic development. The working class, NUMSA argues, will be in a much stronger position to compel the capitalist class to act on these issues if unions and other mass organisations build an alliance with the governing party and the state on a common programme.

### **Towards a social contract?**

The ideas expressed by NUMSA leaders and by Copelyn both break with the tradition of 'militant abstentionism'. They envisage union initiatives in training, productivity, economic policy, investment and 'worker participation'. These ideas form part of an emerging politics of reconstruction in the union movement.

But the politics of reconstruction is not simply replacing resistance. In both perspectives, the organisational strength, independence and militancy of the unions will be crucial if their policies on restructuring are to be implemented. The success of the new politics of reconstruction depends on unions maintaining and deepening the qualities that have been forged in the politics of resistance.

Nonetheless, it is true that if workers and trade unions start to take responsibility for economic growth and development, they will have to



*Militant slogan of resistance: but will the unions be powerful enough to shape the terms of a social contract in a new South Africa?*

*Photo: Eric Miller*

strive for greater productivity and less industrial action. This does have the potential to weaken organisation and dampen militancy.

### **Class struggle and a social contract**

Is this then an emerging support in the union movement for the idea of a social contract?

Over the past few months many organisations and individuals have commented on the need for a 'social contract', variously described as "economic compromise" (Levy and Associates) or "social partnership" (Charles Nupen). Most of the commentators envisage a social contract primarily between business and labour, but also involving the state. Generally they argue that business will

have to accept negotiating over broader social and economic issues, and also accept worker participation in decision-making, or co-determination, from enterprise to macro-economic level. In turn, the unions would be obliged to moderate their wage and other demands, and accept the need for industrial peace.

The COSATU discussion paper reprinted here raises a number of economic issues being debated in the unions. It suggests the possibilities of a social contract should be examined.

The views of NUMSA and of John Copelyn indicate how the unions might approach the issue of a social contract. The question is, do the unions have the power and resources to shape the

terms of a social contract? Or will they be forced to make compromises that in the end weaken organisation and undermine militancy? In a post-apartheid South Africa business, international economic forces and the state bureaucracy will all form an extremely powerful opposition to the union programme.

Given these powers, the NUMSA argument is a strong one. COSATU and ANC economists already exchange ideas regularly. On the other hand, Copelyn's ideas are already being implemented as COSATU seeks to extend the scope of negotiations with SACCOLA. In the end we are likely to see a combination of both strategies. Much will depend, of course, on the attitudes of the ANC and of business. ♦