

Trade unions and social movements in SA

Unions, especially those affiliated to Cosatu, have begun to debate the role of social movements and whether unions should be engaging with them. Gwede Mantashe presents his views on social movements which formed the basis of a debate recently with the APF's Trevor Ngwane at RAU University.

It is not possible to talk of the present without reflecting on the past. More critical is the ability to deal with the present with the simple objective of creating a better future.

Historically the trade union movement has been part of the revolutionary forces, by choice. The Industrial and Commercial Union had a clear inclination towards mass mobilisation. When it resolved to dismiss communists from its ranks it collapsed in 1928. The Congress of Non-European Trade Unions aligned itself with liberation forces. The apartheid state and capital crushed it in 1946. SACTU in the 1950s allied itself with the liberation movement. When the liberation movement was banned in 1960 SACTU could not survive on its own.

The present day progressive labour movement has its roots in the 1973 Durban strikes. From the beginning this labour movement was contested by various ideologies. This is the main reason that the labour movement is divided. A dream to unify it remains one that needs our energies. Cosatu, which remains the most organised and influential working-class formation, has

always been political and ideological in outlook.

This history is important in examining social movements as they emerge today, in relation to the trade union movement.

The Mass Democratic Movement

The United Democratic Front was a federation of formations that agreed, to varying degrees, to work together in the struggle for liberation of the black people in general and Africans in particular. The range of formations that affiliated to the UDF was wide – churches, community-based formations, sector-based formations. All these formations became organs of people's power that made the apartheid system unworkable and the country ungovernable.

These formations produced solid cadres of our revolution with the result that activists from the trade union



movement were activists in their society as well. These activists continue to play a decisive role in their communities. Our union, the NUM, has a total of 85 cadres who are active in local government. We are proud of them, as councillors. The MDM tradition remains

a proud tradition. A tradition of activism.

The new social movements

Because of this Cosatu accepts that issue-based formations will always be a feature of our society. Sector-based formations are necessary for our society to remain mobilised. Hence the resolution at the recent national congress was to work with progressive social movements. We have, however, resolved to refuse to work with any social movements that are narrow, sectarian and divisive in their overall strategy. This resolution, on our part, extends the hand of co-operation to the social movements but not at all costs.

Practically, who are we prepared to engage with?

The Treatment Action Campaign has co-operated with Cosatu in all its campaigns. It has allowed the process of engagement to translate into free flow of ideas. Critical to their strategy is the preparedness to engage everybody, including the ANC-led government, even when there are disagreements. In our view such a formation is critical of government when it should be. But the orientation is to change society not just to define it. This is the kind of a social movement we will work with.

The Anti-War Coalition behaved in a way that was sectarian in my own view. Its hatred of the ANC closed its eyes even where there was agreement. In my analysis this borders on anarchy. It is not helpful to the cause of the poor.

Differences in strategy and tactics

Our strategic analysis is that a lot of progress has been made since 1994. In the area of social transformation there is visible progress. Millions of our people have houses (those built by government and those who have title deeds for houses they occupied for many decades) and access to clean

drinking water, particularly in the rural areas. Access to electricity has improved from 32% in 1995 to 70%. Equalisation of social welfare pension and creation of many social grants is a comprehensive strategy to alleviate poverty.

In the area of worker rights, legislation in place has reversed the effects of pre-apartheid and apartheid legislations. The LRA, Employment Equity Act and Skills Development Act, together reverse the effect of the Job Reservation Act, Wage Act and Industrial Conciliation Act all promulgated as an aftermath of the 1922 white mineworkers strike.

We have openly disagreed with the ANC on the macro-economic framework. Growing unemployment, deepening poverty and growing inequalities in society have been raised sharply by Cosatu, more than by any formation in our society. The resistance to privatisation has been driven by Cosatu and its affiliates more than any other by anyone else.

Where we differ with our friends in the social movements is that we prefer to engage than howl on the periphery. The shift from the contractionary fiscal and monetary policies to more expansionary policies is a product of engagement. The visible increase in government investment spending is in line with our state-led economic growth approach.

We will support the ANC in 2004 elections and put the following issues on the agenda:

- unemployment and poverty (quality of jobs will be pushed);
- rural development;
- the quality of Health Services;
- HIV/AIDS;
- public transport policy;
- restructuring of state assets/privatisation; and
- economic policy framework.

The first milestone will be seeing these issues finding their way into the ANC manifesto and we will continue fighting for implementation after the elections.

We regard this as our role as the trade union movement. Ideally the social movements would take up other issues and mount pressure on the state to implement specific policies. If we were working together, comparing notes on strategy and tactics, we would constitute a vibrant civil society. We would see more successes.

A strategy that is premised on killing the alliance and dividing the labour movement keep us apart. On the part of labour movement we are not going to spend nights strategising on how to divide any of the social movements, including those who have opted to be hostile to us. We will use every opportunity to emphasise that we can achieve more by working together.

Conclusion

The trade union movement is a home for all workers irrespective of their political affiliation. Everybody has a right to contest ideas within the established structures of Cosatu and its affiliates. Once decisions have been taken they are binding on everybody. The tendency not to abide with decisions that you do not agree with is reactionary and counter-revolutionary. We have fought this tendency in the past. We will continue to fight it into the future, with everything we have. We will engage the social movements and any other formation on the basis of our own policy positions and resolutions. There is no other basis. Otherwise we cease to be an organisation, we become individuals.

Mantashe is general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers.

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