

Unions and politics

comments from the floor

The different themes

Oupa Bodibe: A few themes emerge from Lloyd Sachikonye's and Roger Southall's contributions.

The first theme concerns the context. How do we define the brand of unionism in South Africa? In pre-colonial times, you find that unions are very active, but in post-colonial times, unions are forced to go back to the workplace. We see this in South Africa also. So how do we locate the trade unionism in the current context?

The second theme concerns the issue of union-inspired political movements. To what extent can they sustain alternatives and still keep their working class constituency?

Thirdly, how do unions find a niche for themselves in society by making broader alliances with other movements?

Fourthly, how do we read the political situation in South Africa today? What are the limits and possibilities? How do we understand the alliance itself, in terms of its constituencies and aspirations? What are the implications of moving forward with the alliance?

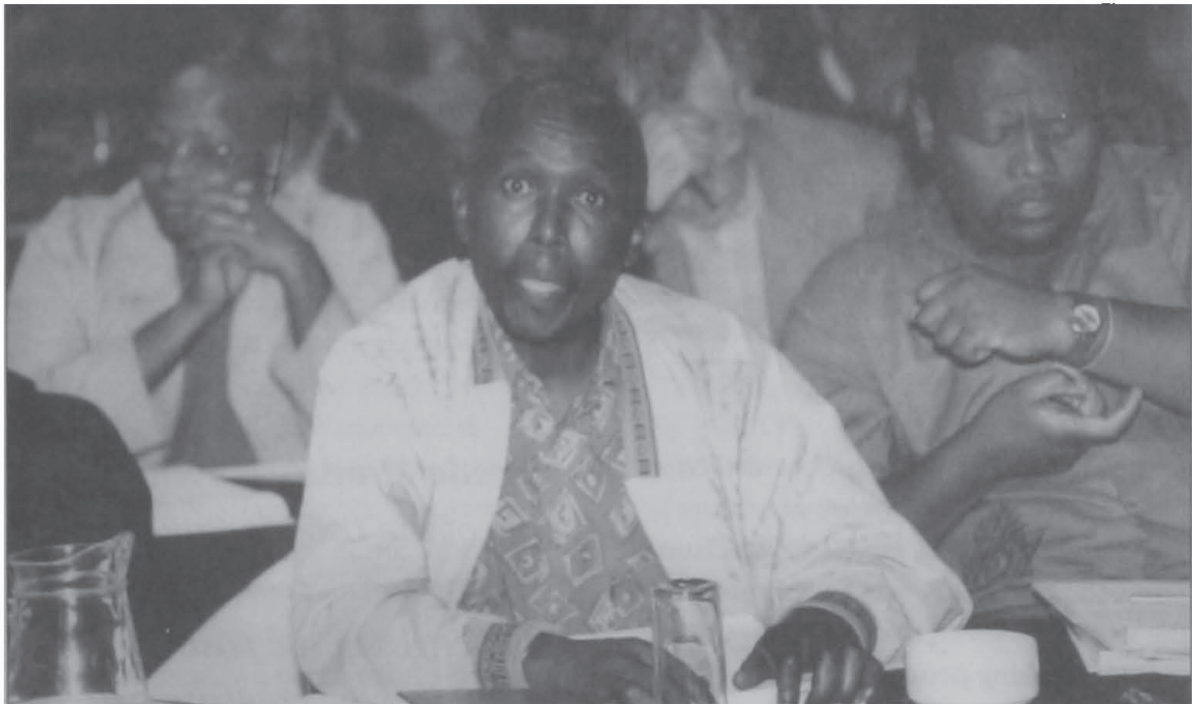
Fifthly, what do we mean by marginalisation and from whom? Some will argue that if you have a union movement that is still capable of mobilising its forces, it puts a different spin to the notion of marginalisation

Compiled by Etienne Vlok.

Marginalisation and representation

Devan Pillay: The labour movement is marginalised in certain areas of government policy. This might not be the case in the Department of Labour, but it is in the Department of Finance. The voices of labour and the left are marginalised in terms of the general public discourse. The key area is in the media. Yet the labour movement has large stakes in media companies through their investment companies. The labour movement could have editorial influence on Highveld Stereo, eTV, *Business Day* and the *Sunday Times*. But the investment companies have abandoned that terrain of engagement because they want to get the highest returns for their investments

Steve Faulkner: Part of the South African trade union experience is 'we know best'. So it is good to have Lloyd Sachikonye from Zimbabwe here. A general crisis of representation exists. No one represents the people anymore. There is a diminishing accessibility to public discourse. In those countries where unions have power, they are the people's representatives. Unions are at their most powerful when they consciously announce their independence like the Sierra Leone Labour Congress



Bafana Ndebele: 'The ANC is contested terrain.'

(SLLC), the Trades Union Congress (TUC) of Ghana and the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) We forget how relatively vibrant the labour movement in South Africa is

The alliance

Bafana Ndebele: A strategic alliance goes deep and the tripartite alliance is strategic. This alliance was there in 1960 with the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and continued with COSATU. Some forces think that the tripartite alliance should break. If we break it will be the capitalists' gain. The ANC is an omnibus, therefore the ANC is contested terrain. If you want to contest it, get on. If not, stay off. In South Africa we cannot say that trade unions begin and stop in the factory. From 1912 to 1990 the fight was in the factories and also in the townships

The situation in Zimbabwe

Geoff Nkadimeng: Regarding the alliance between the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), what is its

programme, guiding principles and economic policy?

John Pape: Describe the efforts of the ZCTU and the MDC to develop an alternative economic policy. With the increased activities of the ZCTU, has there been an expansion of the participatory democracy and shopfloor structures?

Lloyd Sachikonye: Regarding the alternative agenda, in the 1990s the ZCTU had a major economic document, called 'Beyond ESAP'. It raised harsh questions. It could form the basis for an alternative

How stable is the alliance? It is an unlikely alliance between employers and the labour movement. It is a temporary tactical alliance. One of the factors that strengthen the alliance is that the unions are quite strong at different levels. There is a debate on whether the MDC will compromise business interests. The alliance continues with an eye on the presidential elections. If the economic crisis deepens, support for the MDC will grow. ★