
Unions

Where are they at?

*Globalisation, government's macroeconomic policy and Congress Alliance politics have become some of the key challenges facing the labour movement in South Africa. **Elias Cebekhulu** examines the responses of shop stewards to these challenges and whether they will paralyse unions or force them to embrace more creative forms of opposition.*

Globalisation, driven by technology, is regarded as an inevitable force sweeping South Africa. The country accepted globalisation when it abandoned the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) and adopted the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Policy (Gear) in 1996. This marked the beginning of a new era in labour markets where words such as privatisation, flexibility, and casualisation became popular.

The globalisation process is dynamic and very complex to understand. There is a set of rules that a country needs to follow in order to comply with the demands of globalisation – the macroeconomic policy needs to be in line with the principle of neoliberalism. This is why the government adopted Gear. The logic behind the shift was purely an economic one because a promise of more investment was made.

This shift alone is viewed by the Left as undermining the gains the

trade union movement achieved through years of struggle. At the moment the alliance bonds the trade union movement to the ruling ANC. But because Gear, amongst other developments, has led to a decline in union membership some activists are starting to question the logic of being in an alliance with the ruling party.

In the post-1994 period unions have lost their independence and have become subordinate to the ANC-led government. The labour movement is now simply one force, relatively minor, that is exerting pressure on the ANC government. For one to understand the situation, the starting point should be the events that unfolded when South Africa was admitted into global markets and politics.

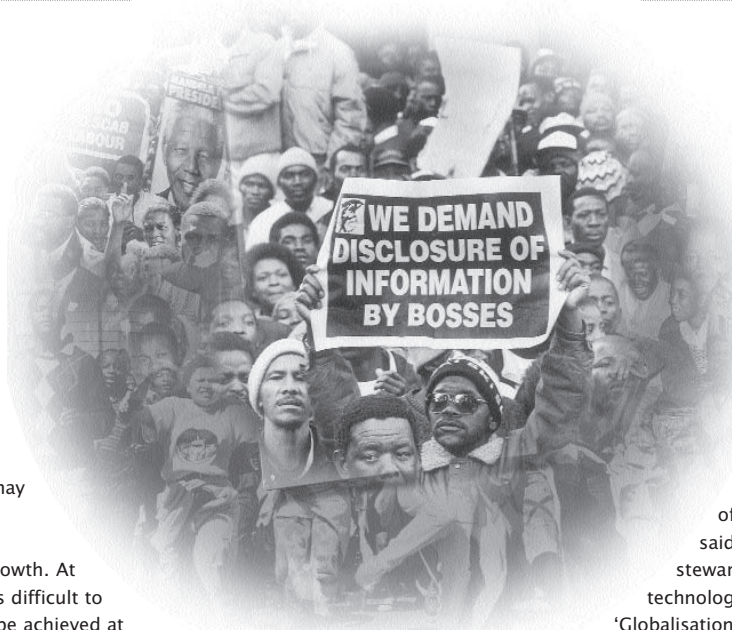
Have unions benefited?

Prior to 1994 the alliance was for the sake of national liberation. With the decline in jobs from about 1996, the role of trade unions in protecting the

interests of workers became questionable. It became obvious that the role of unions in advancing and protecting workers' interests is now subordinate to the whims of the ruling party.

With the alliance under severe scrutiny there has been research and active discussion regarding the future strategy for labour, involving the class compromise which featured in other societies undergoing transition. What is this class compromise? Class compromise is where the trade unions, through participation in alliances, compromise their militancy for more investment that might create sustainable jobs.

Webster (1999:10) argues that participation in the alliance is a strategic necessity. His argument is based on the analysis that the global arena creates a platform that allows a gain for one party to be a compromise by the other. Thus, Adler and Webster (2000:4) argue that South Africa is in the midst of two difficult



transformations: the deepening of a democratic order and the reconstruction of the economy. The two processes are potentially contradictory and their interaction may simultaneously undermine both democracy and growth. At the same time it is difficult to see how one can be achieved at the expense of the other. Therefore, Adler and Webster (2000:3) see the question of unions being in the alliance as a strategic necessity.

But Lehurule does not see the alliance as a strategic necessity. He argues that the union movement has lost its independence in the alliance. He states that the global forces dictate and shape the policies without even considering the effect on the union movement (1999:22). His argument is supported by Buhlungu who also argues that globalisation drastically limits the union power by setting a neoliberal policy agenda (1998:71). While such arrangements are agreed on in the alliance boardrooms in Cosatu's presence, as a worker's legitimate representative, Cosatu has found itself trying to be loyal to the ANC while at the same time trying to defend its members' interests.

Impact of globalisation

With the globalisation of trade, employment, economic policy and industrial relations, the South African labour market has seen more workers being dismissed in all working spheres due to privatisation, outsourcing and casualisation. Now workers are

beginning challenge the policy. The government is beginning to feel some pressure but the global and local community are closely monitoring whether the government can handle the pressure or whether the working class is going to lose the momentum and accept the status quo.

Shop stewards on Gear, globalisation and the alliance

The objectives of this article are to determine how workers see the influence of globalisation (particularly its technological development in their respective workplaces), to analyse the changes in labour conditions and the responses of unions to the established relationship between globalisation and the policies pursued by the ANC-led government, and to examine the contradictions implicit in the alliance, in supporting neoliberal measures while seeking to retain a political base amongst black workers and the poor.

A survey was conducted amongst 120 shop stewards in ten Cosatu affiliates to find out their views on globalisation, Gear and the alliance. The shop stewards were presented with a common definition of

globalisation, which says that it is an economy whose core activity operates on a planetary scale and they were asked whether this is an accurate definition of globalisation. A total of 94% said yes, and 6% said no. A Sactwu shop stewards who is anti-technological globalisation said:

'Globalisation is just a myth, there is nothing like the economy that operates on a planetary scale. If economies operate on a planetary scale, why are we getting retrenched in our cotton industry while there are no retrenchments in other countries'.

The shop stewards were then asked whether their unions welcomed the implementation of new technology. The majority of shop stewards (87%) said no. A Samwu member said new technology is so advanced that the current employees are unable to use it, since they were not trained to do so. Only 13% of shop stewards supported new technology as it makes communication easier among unions.

Shop stewards interviewed showed a clear understanding of what Gear and the RDP represent. A total of 45% identified privatisation as the concept they mostly dislike, 25% casualisation, 14% outsourcing and 7% functional flexibility. One of the reasons given by a Ccepwawu shop steward for the dislike of privatisation is that it enriches the owner at the expense of the workers. When asked about the concept 'labour market flexibility', one Nehawu shop steward said: 'labour market flexibility tells the workers to understand the constraints of the

economy in a global setting and forget about their empty stomachs.'

On the ongoing debate on whether most companies are using casual labour and its impact on the industry, the majority of shop stewards (89%) said, casualisation of labour is a norm in their industry and is not a solution to the growth of the economy and has negative effects on the working class. Contracting out, outsourcing and wage flexibility were also identified by the shop stewards as the major problems facing unions. All the shop stewards interviewed identified Gear as the main cause of the problems facing labour.

The shop stewards were asked whether international worker solidarity could be a solution to the threats posed by globalisation. The majority (78%) said no. A Samwu shop steward said workers from developed, developing and underdeveloped nations have different needs and demands. Therefore, it is impossible that they can work towards achieving the same objectives. Furthermore the shop steward elaborated that the fight against globalisation is a fight against the government elected by the workers and therefore unity among unions is impossible. Those in support of international solidarity believed that workers could join hands regardless of their geographic location.

On the question of the alliance, shop stewards said that the workers are not benefiting from the ruling government. An estimated 68% of the shop stewards interviewed said the unions need to launch a new workers' opposition party, whereas 32% said the workers are benefiting from the alliance.

Conclusion

The decline in union membership is a critical historical development in South

African labour markets. The government's macroeconomic policy is to be blamed for not advancing the trade union movements' interests. Instead it has led to tension between the ANC-led government and the alliance partners. Those languishing in the bottom are accusing Cosatu leadership of being sell-outs.

The trade union movement's proud history of militants can be traced back from the days of Kadalie in the 1920s, Zulu Phungula who initiated the 1973 Durban docks strike 30 years ago and Elijah Barayi in the mid-1980s.

The shift in union strategy was initiated by the likes of Jay Naidoo and Mbhazima Shilowa who eventually moved out of the labour movement into government and in Naidoo's case, business. At first when the leaders announced they would be joining the government, the workers thought they would have comrades in government, forgetting that people change as per organisational demand.

From the deliberations made in this article it is evident that globalisation, Gear and the alliance politics pose new threats to the trade union movement.

Acknowledging the efforts and sacrifices shown by the workers in trying to make the labour market conducive, the following recommendations being advanced might be useful:

- Total worker inclusion in decision-making regarding technology
- Regulation of labour market flexibility
- Building solidarity with other unions
- Grooming and maintaining a strong Cosatu leadership.

Cebekhulu is a senior lecturer in Social Policy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

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