

# Unity talks stop start

The unity talks between different union formations got underway after a decision was taken in 1981. These talks, which spanned many years, revealed a number of sensitive debates, which continue to plague unions today. The following are extracts from reports on different meetings which formed part of the lengthy unity talks process.

**T**he announcement that a new trade union federation is to be launched on 30 November 1985 brings to an end four years of discussions on trade union unity. The unions that have agreed to launch the new federation are: Federation of South African Trade Unions' (Fosatu's) nine affiliates (130 000); the National Union of

Mineworkers (100 000); General Workers Union (12 000); Food and Canning Workers Union (25 000); Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (50 000); Cape Town Municipal Workers Association (12 000); the 11 unions affiliated to the United Democratic Front (40 000: the most important being South African and Allied Workers Union and General and Allied Workers Union); and the nine affiliates of the National Federation of Workers (120 000: also a UDF affiliate). Together these unions represent a paid up membership of 380 000 and a signed up membership of over half a million.

The five principles accepted by all the unions and on which the federation will be based are: non-racialism; one union one industry; worker control; representation on the basis of paid up membership; and cooperation at a national level in the new federation. This is a major step forward for the trade union movement, although a number of unions, which were involved in the earlier discussions, have decided not to join the federation.

The labour scene has changed dramatically since the first unity talks were held at Langa on 8 August 1981. More unions have been established and the number of unionised workers has more than doubled. Most significant was the establishment of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1982, and which now claims 230 000 signed up members of which 100 000 are paid up. The issues and union alliances have also shifted as the political conditions changed. Registration, for example, which led to bitter division between Fosatu unions and others, is now a non-issue for the vast majority of unions. Membership of industrial councils remains the subject of debate but differences among unions have not prevented cooperation and unity. There is broad agreement on the need for democratic strong shopfloor structures,

worker control, industrial unionism, and political action (the forms this should take - particularly political action - remain to be debated). Economically, the recession has forced unions to consolidate factory structures to protect hard-won gains. Politically, repression has increased with mounting struggles in the townships, culminating in the state of emergency, the detention of activists and the banning of the Congress of South African Students. The nature of the economic and political crisis necessitates union cooperation in order to ensure a unified response.

The new super federation brings together the most organised workers in the strategic sectors of the economy. It constitutes a powerful force on the shopfloor and will also, no doubt, play an important political role.

## BACKGROUND TO UNITY TALKS

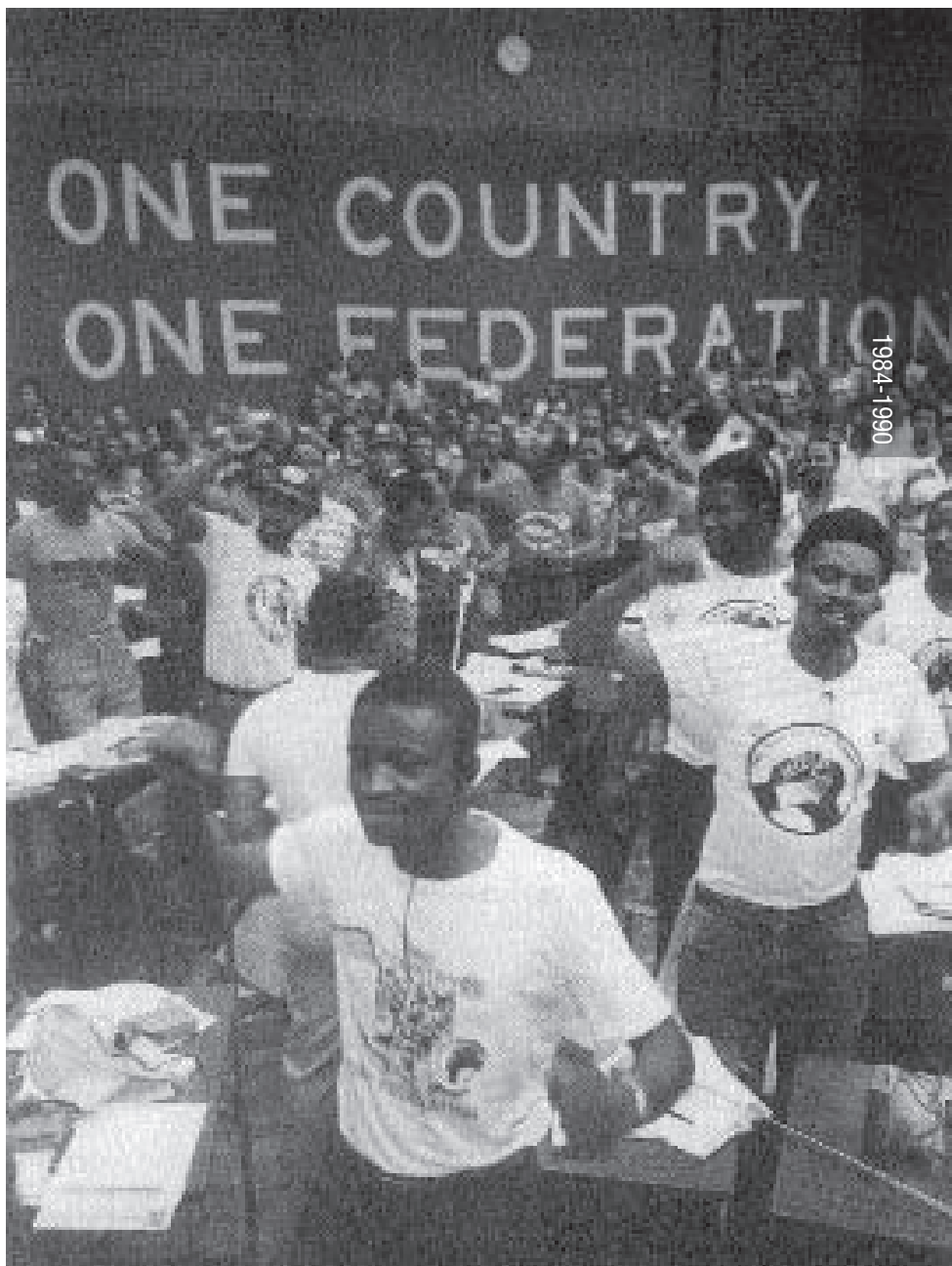
The unity discussions started in August 1981 in Langa. The meeting rejected the state's attempt to control the union movement. All the unregistered unions argued that registration was a mechanism of control and that cooption was likely. The registered unions argued it should be seen as a tactical issue, which would permit protection, and that cooption could be resisted through strong shopfloor organisation. Very little was achieved between the unions. At the April 1982 talks MACWUSA/GWUSA were the first to leave in protest over the issue of registration. In July 1982 MACWUSA/GWUSA; SAAWU; OVGWU (Orange Vaal General Workers Union); BMWU (Black Municipal Workers Union) and GAWU presented a list of seven principles which were considered imperative if unity was to be established: non-registration; shopfloor bargaining; non-racialism; federation policy to be binding on affiliates; worker control; participation in community issues and the rejection of reactionary bodies

nationally and internationally. All the unions could not agree on all of the principles and the talks deadlocked.

In April 1983, at Athlone, a steering committee was established. At subsequent meetings differences re-emerged, especially in October that year when MACWUSA/GWUSA, SAAWU, GAWU and CUSA (Council of Unions of South Africa) failed to provide the necessary information to assist the committee in the demarcation discussions. There were also divisions over general industrial unionism. Exacerbating these tensions were accusations of competition and poaching took place. The issue of demarcation proved to be a rather sensitive issue. As the recession took effect all unions were badly hit by retrenchments but it was the industrial unions, which best weathered the crisis. This seemed to substantiate some of the criticisms of the industrial unions that the general unions had weak structures. In fact the argument for industrial unionism had been won by the March 1984 meeting, with the general unions agreeing, in principle, to industrialise. However, there was no agreement as to time span or means by which this could be achieved.

At the March meeting, the feasibility committee announced that some of the unions in the talks were not 'ready or able' to participate in the federation because they had not provided information on membership which was necessary for industrial demarcation to proceed. These unions - SAAWU, GAWU and MAGWUSA (Municipal and General Workers Union) - were offered observer status, which they refused and left the talks.

By the end of 1984 three distinct groupings had emerged within the independent labour movement: the core of the 'unity talks unions'; the unions affiliated to the United Democratic Front; and the emergent black consciousness unions in



AZACTU (Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions, an affiliate of National Forum), which had never participated in the unity talks, mainly because many had been established only after the unity talks were initiated. The core 'unity unions' were distinguished by the fact that they were industrial unions and, with the exception of CUSA, refused to align themselves to any political tendency. (CUSA dealt with the matter by affiliating to both UDF and National Forum.) By contrast the majority of the UDF and National Forum aligned unions were general unions and unregistered.

By far the largest and best-organised grouping was the 'unity unions'. The group was by no means monolithic with three broad tendencies co-existing: non-alignment to ensure worker control and independence

('workerist'); support for UDF and more active political involvement; and among some CUSA affiliates a residual attachment to the principle of 'black leadership' (at CUSA's annual conference in late 1984 there was already disquiet over the direction of the unity talks). Over-ruling these political differences was a common commitment to unity on the basis of industrial unionism, democratic shopfloor structures and worker control.

In early 1985 there were rumours that SACTU (South African Congress of Trade Unions, largely suppressed during the 1960s) had intentions of reviving itself internally and that this move would be supported by SAAWU, GAWU, MWASA (Western Cape) and the Clothing Workers Union. The commemoration meetings planned in

different parts of the country fuelled the speculation, but any such intention was denied by the unions concerned and by SACTU, which urged maximum unity within the new federation.

### RE-ALIGNMENT

In May 1985 all the unions were informed of the progress of the unity talks and invited to a meeting on 8 and 9 June to discuss the draft constitution for the federation. The widening of the unity talks to all unions was a result of pressure, within Fosatu particularly, and to ensure a wider legitimacy both within South Africa and on the international plane. The successful May Day Committee involving all the unions in the Transvaal raised hopes of unity at the impending talks at Impelegeng in June. Preceding the talks there was a regional meeting on the East Rand between Fosatu affiliates and other unions in the area. Invited for the first time were the black consciousness unions.

At the Impelegeng talks differences emerged over the question of non-racialism; the demand to be party to the redrafting of the constitution by unions not previously involved; the timing of the launch and the process of mergers and formation of industrial unions. The meeting allowed all unions to state their positions. AZACTU and the UDF aligned unions agreed on the questions of timing and the drafting of the constitution, while they differed on non-racialism. AZACTU argued for an 'anti-racist' position which left open the possibility of blacks only constitutions for member unions. The industrial unions were clear: they wanted the federation established before the end of the year on the basis of the five principles.

A credentials committee was established to check the bona fides of all the unions and to prepare for the launch. Subsequent meetings were not attended by AZACTU. The UDF unions decided to enter the federation. Since then the NUM has withdrawn from CUSA because of the latter's 'lack of seriousness towards the formation of a federation of all emerging unions.' CUSA, a

participant in the talks for the past four years, withdrew from the feasibility committee and will not be entering the new super federation. In a carefully worded statement CUSA said that it was still committed to trade union unity. Explaining its attitude to the talks, CUSA said it took exception to the 'present conditional invitations extended to some of its affiliates and thus ignoring CUSA as a federation.' It added that because of the oppressive and exploitative system of apartheid, black workers have reservations in participating in talks, which do not enforce the principle of black leadership.

AZACTU is now also outside unless it accepts the five principles. In an attack on the feasibility committee, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, coordinator of AZACTU, said the letters informing the confederation's affiliates of their exclusion from the talks came as a surprise to him: 'It is now becoming apparent that a certain clique has been trying to make unity its own property through caucuses and under-currents.' This leaves CUSA and AZACTU outside the new federation. Whether their common black consciousness heritage is enough to overcome organisational differences (industrial versus general unionism) and make possible a merger remains to be seen.

Amongst the new federation unions discussions to establish 'one union one industry' are underway: between Sweet, Food and Allied Workers Union and Food and Canning Workers Union, and between Transport and General Workers Union and General Workers Union. Although the general unions in the new federation have accepted that they must industrialise, they see this as a long and complex process. To the industrial unions it seems much simpler.

The new federation will certainly enjoy wide support and legitimacy as the most representative organisation of black workers in South Africa's history. Nonetheless, the CUSA-AZACTU grouping will continue to represent approximately 100 000 to 150 000 workers. The organisational strength is in CUSA, concentrated mainly in their industrial unions: chemical, food,

construction and transport. In each of these sectors - except perhaps for construction where CUSA's BCAWU is dominant - there is potential for competition with the federation unions. Nonetheless, the present political-economic crisis provides the objective conditions for united action by the two groupings. Indeed, this would seem to be imperative if attacks by capital and the state are to be successfully resisted.

### COSATU LAUNCH

On the weekend of 29 November to 1 December, 870 delegates from all over South Africa met in Durban to found the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). Thirty-three unions with a paid up membership of 449 679 were represented.

The inaugural congress opened with a speech by Cyril Ramaphosa, the conference convener. 'Workers' political strength depends upon building strong and militant organisation in the workplace. We also have to realise that organised workers are not representative of the working class as a whole but are its most effective weapon. Therefore, for workers it is important that organisation on the shopfloor be strengthened and in this way we will be able to contribute to the struggle of the working class as a whole and to the struggle of the oppressed people in this country.'

This was the central thrust of Ramaphosa's opening speech, which set the tone for the inaugural congress. This was a historic occasion: 'The formation of this congress represents a tremendous victory for the working class. Never before has it been so powerful and so poised to make a mark in society.' Ramaphosa went on to discuss the role that Cosatu will play in the crisis in which South Africa now finds itself and its crucial role within the wider struggle for liberation: 'As unions we have influenced the wider political struggle. Our struggles on the shopfloor have widened the space for struggles in the community...'

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*This is an edited version of different reports on the unity talk process, which appeared in various editions of the Labour Bulletin.*