

What would Cosatu's pioneers think?

In 1987 **Steven Friedman** wrote a valuable book, *Building Tomorrow Today*, charting the emergence of a new militant labour movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. Here he assumes the eyes of those pioneering trade unionists and assesses Cosatu's current performance.

If the labour movement's pioneers had been offered a vision, in the mid-1970s, of today, they might be deeply disappointed. On the other hand, if they reflected on what they may have seen, they might be very pleased.

While people joined the movement for different reasons, everyone involved in independent unionism wanted apartheid overthrown. But there was also widespread support for the principle that workers, not a political movement, should control unions. Some insisted that this meant

that unions should not be allied to liberation movements. These 'workerists' whose contest with the 'populists' who favoured these links was a major influence on the movement's ideological direction. And many saw unionism as a vehicle on the road to socialism.

Before the 'populist' general unions were formed, the early unionists in Fosatu (Federation of South African Trade Unions – a forerunner to Cosatu) and the Western Cape independent unions were mainly socialists. They saw the labour movement not only as a force for ending racial domination, but as an independent vehicle of the working class. If this vehicle was able to remain independent of the liberation movement, with its stress on majority rule but not socialism, it could prompt change which would go well beyond eliminating minority rule. It would usher in a new economic order.

These visionaries would most likely have been saddened by a flash forward to 2005.

First, the 'workerist' hope that the labour movement would remain outside the liberation movement has been thoroughly dashed. The power of the ANC tradition, it turned out, was irresistible. Besides the obvious fact that Cosatu has joined the tripartite alliance, some personal examples show just how naïve the view that organised workers would reject the liberation movements proved to be.

In 1982, Joe Foster, then general secretary of Fosatu, delivered an

important address advocating worker independence from the liberation movement. In 1994, he became an ANC senator. Moses Mayekiso, a key 'workerist', became an ANC MP. So did John Gomomo, former Cosatu president who was locked in battle with 'populists' in Uitenhage in the mid-1980s.

Second, post-apartheid South Africa is capitalist – more so, some on the left claim, than the apartheid state. And, while Cosatu still insists on its commitment to socialism, the emergence of union investment companies suggests that it too has made its peace with the system.

Third, far from shaping a democratic South Africa towards socialism, Cosatu has been powerless to stop a macro-economic policy which it rejects. It has also had only limited success in blocking privatisation. Workers sent to parliament on the ANC list have not championed union positions. 'Mass action' has had little effect on government policy. Cosatu's leadership has been weakened by the departure of leading figures into government and business (the latter would have seemed inconceivable in the 1980s) and it has been reduced to reacting to government initiatives, often without success. Rather than ensuring a worker-led government, it seems, Cosatu has become a junior partner of the liberation movement.

Given the hopes of the 1970s, disappointment seems justified. But, if we look at how things might have turned out, it seems less so.

First, this analysis has suggested



Cosatu pioneers, John Gomomo and Moses Mayekiso

that the end of apartheid was the least which could have been expected from the worker movement. But it did not look that way in the mid-1970s. Even after the Durban strikes of 1973 and the Soweto uprising of 1976, the system seemed firmly in place, not fated to collapse within 20 years. The fact that it did die sooner than expected was a result of many factors, but worker mobilisation was one. The end of apartheid is a considerable achievement, for which the labour movement can take a share of the credit.

Second, ours could have been yet another union movement to become a rubber stamp for the governing party. But, while it has not remained separate from the ANC, it has remained independent within it. Not only has Cosatu opposed the government on economic policy, but, on issues such as Zimbabwe, HIV/AIDS and alleged plots against the State President, it has been a more effective opposition than parliament. Its engagement with the Zuma affair has not been its finest hour, since it seemed to rely on support for an individual, not for a principle, and this has damaged its credibility. It could be argued that this is an inherent danger of getting embroiled in nationalist politics, but it certainly does not suggest slavish obedience to authority.

As Karl von Holdt's important book, *Transition from Below*, points out, the claim that workers would

have to choose between 'class' or a 'race' proved false: most have no problem adopting both. Many workers prize their identities as black people and their need to fight for 'national liberation' but they also value their role as workers.

This explains why Cosatu is part of the alliance. But it also explains its independence. It also helps explain why union practices, such as internal democracy, may have impacted on the political movement. Certainly Cosatu, despite the Zuma saga, has been an important democratic voice – probably the most important in the society. It is easy to imagine outcomes in which Cosatu would have become far more subservient than it has and this too is an achievement.

Third, this government would not have been the first to have cracked down on the labour movement for challenging it and 'getting in the way of economic growth'. But, despite some union-bashing in the ANC, the labour movement has proved strong enough to withstand pressure.

In fact it has done more. Unions do influence policy, even if not as much as they would like. They had a major role in shaping current labour law and have managed to protect it, despite considerable pressure from business and parts of the ANC. It also seems likely that the government has proceeded cautiously on privatisation for fear of alienating unions. And, while several factors

forced the government to make antiretrovirals available to people living with AIDS, Cosatu was part of the coalition which won this.

Unions also retain a strong presence on the shop floor and do win gains for their members. So, while Cosatu's influence may not be as great as the pioneers would like, it has enough power to influence some important laws and policies. It is not hard to imagine far worse outcomes for workers and their unions.

Some disappointment at current realities may, therefore, reflect inflated expectations in the pioneering days. Reality proved far more difficult than the early visions suggested.

This does not mean that Cosatu is achieving all that it could. Even allowing for unpleasant realities, the Zuma saga does suggest a lack of strategic vision.

While changing government policy may be difficult, methods have often been stereotyped. Everyone, for example, knows now that Cosatu can organise at most two days of general stoppage a year and this has long since ceased to instil fear in anyone. And Cosatu has not come to grips with its most important challenge. This is how to link up with the millions excluded from the formal job market.

Complacency, therefore, can only blind its leadership to how much it must still do. But there is no doubt that democracy, and the rights of working people, are far better for Cosatu's presence. And that in itself has made the efforts of unionists since the 1970s deeply worthwhile.

Steven Friedman is a senior researcher at the Centre for Policy Studies and writes a regular column for the Business Day.