

# When the elephants fight the grass will suffer

The problem of two centres of power is not only an ANC issue – it is increasingly applying to unions. A number of unions have in recent times, faced internal infighting and divisions, which have almost torn them apart. The **Labour Bulletin** explores the extent to which divisions are emerging as a result of tensions between general secretaries and presidents.



The secretariat report tabled at Cosatu's recent central committee meeting stated: 'From time to time, our affiliates have faced challenges to ensure factions do not become destructive or threaten the cohesion of the union. A number of interventions by Cosatu are underway in these situations'. Interventions have included the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), Communication Workers Union (CWU), the SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) and the Chemical Paper, Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union (Ceppwawu) - in relation to splinter unions - and more recently the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa) and Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu).

The secretariat report argues that critical measures to address internal divisions include

the following:

- 'Ensuring genuine democracy, so that everyone feels they have a voice and a chance to convince others and influence the policies and direction of the union. Should a group of leaders, officials or members feel that they are no longer able to do so, the disaffected groups will try to go outside the union structures to gain power.
- Unions must not lose focus on representing the interests of members. At all times there should be clear programmes to unite the union beyond the annual wage negotiations. When there is no clear programme - with little or nothing to spend energies on, the organisations or faction eat the organisation up'.

The report also sought to explore the factors contributing to divisions amongst the

national office bearers in Cosatu affiliates.

These factors include, amongst others

- Mergers, which include blending different traditions and cultures which often, takes time.
- All over the world unions that have close relations with political formations rarely escape the divisions and factions in those political parties. When political movements split, unions may not survive. The difficulties facing the Zimbabwean Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) provide the latest lesson in this regard. The assault on leaders by thugs suspected to be employed by or acting on behalf of a political party or the state or factions within the union can completely destroy the cohesion and eventually cause a split. The KMU of Philippines, one of the greatest allies of Cosatu, split a few years

ago following a division in the party with which they had close relations. The KMU never regrouped from this split and remains a shadow of its former self.

- It would be naive not to assume that of factions within the congress movement and outside will not seek to have an influence and win the support of Cosatu and its unions. Individual leaders within unions have allegiances to factions that exist in the alliance. These factions contest the direction of the movement and project themselves as the true custodians of the correct line. The ANC and Cosatu are broad churches attracting in their ranks all manner of different schools of thought or traditions. The ANC has for nine decades managed these well. The judgement is out for all younger formations such as Cosatu and its unions. We have not openly debated this reality in the past.
- Cosatu unions grew very rapidly in their first 10 to 15 years. This growth has increased the demands on national office bearers and makes service to members, communication and mandating processes more difficult. This becomes a fertile ground for divisions and disenchantment.
- The trade union movement has developed its own brand of unionism centred on the principle of worker control and collective leadership. Unlike Europe and the US unions, which confer all executive power on either a full-time president or general secretary, we straddle the two models in order to enforce collectivism. The president is the political head. Traditionally this meant exercising political oversight from a workplace. A full-time general secretary with executive power is responsible for all operations, coordination and oversight of the staff and programmes. As the unions grew, however, they introduced the concept of full-time release of worker national office bearers (NOBs) in recognition of the increased load on the office bearer collective. Divisions often arise out of challenges in maintaining a collective approach in these circumstances.
- The advent of union investment companies has created tensions in some unions and were a problem in unions such as Fawu as far back as 1997 where it was reported

that such developments had become a 'new terrain for old factions in the union to fight out their differences.'

The secretariat report acknowledged that divisions, which can emerge between the general secretaries and presidents, have not been managed properly. 'We have at times created two centres of power at a huge cost to the cohesion of the organisation. This is caused by a failure to define the roles and responsibilities much more clearly, leading to bickering about who should do what'

### TWO CENTRES OF POWER

It is not the first time this issue has been raised within Cosatu and it has been the subject of some discussion. The organisational report to the 2001 central committee referred to the respective roles of general secretaries and union presidents. The report stated: 'The commitment to worker control shaped Cosatu's leadership structure, which is unique in the world. In the American AFL-CIO, the president is unquestionably and clearly the leader. In the British TUC, the leader is the general secretary. In South Africa, in contrast, there is a balance. The president is regarded as the political head while the general secretary acts as the engine of the organisation, with considerable executive powers under the constitution. The president and worker national office bearers play a political oversight role whereas the secretaries manage the movement on a daily basis.'

The report highlights potential benefits and pitfalls. 'While this model forces collective leadership and discourages individualism, it can lead to an unclear division of responsibilities. Personality dynamics have led to endless clashes among the national office bearers. The emergence of general secretaries with origins in the labour movement and of full-time worker NOBs should work to entrench this collectivity. Where NOBs' meetings were held only once every month or two, today most NOBs' meetings take place weekly or fortnightly. Besides reinforcing collective responsibility, this means worker NOBs can be better briefed and exercise more effective political oversight.

This system is not without problems,

however. In particular, because of distance, worker leaders are not always able to play an effective oversight role. That can leave the secretariat effectively to act as the political leadership.'

What has been emerging in recent years, with the move towards the approval of full-time presidents, especially in the public service unions, is the overlap of responsibilities between general secretaries and presidents. Increasingly there are reports of presidents interfering in the day-to-day operation of the union to the extent that there have been a number of instances where presidents have unconstitutionally suspended elected NOBs. One such example was Nehawu and more recently Fawu.

### FAWU AT IT AGAIN

Fawu has a checkered history and is known for its internal divisions and factionalism with numerous instances where the general secretaries (and other office bearers) have been suspended by the union president in 1997. The *Labour Bulletin* reported on a series of suspensions, counter-suspensions and the removal of senior office bearers who were viewed to support the assistant general secretary at the time Ernest Buthelezi.

He in turn was dismissed for 'abusing his powers and defrauding the union'. The *Bulletin* argued at the time that the move to oust Buthelezi was sparked by his accusations of misconduct against the union's general secretary Mandla Gxanyana in 1996. More recently, the union's general secretary Katishi Masemola was unconstitutionally suspended by the union's president. Katishi challenged his suspension in the High Court, which set aside his suspension. In a twist to this saga the president was arrested for misuse of union monies on 19 July. He and the deputy general secretary and second vice president were removed from office the following week by the union's national executive committee.

The developments in Fawu do not appear, on the surface, to have their origins in political differences but are largely based on opportunism and the fact that two centres of power have emerged in the union where the union president has got involved in day-to-day activities of the union.