

Who is paying for Cosatu's reconnection fee? Are workers still on the (fixed) line?

Over the years, various commissions and reports have highlighted organisational weaknesses within Cosatu and its affiliates. This issue, yet again, became the subject of intense discussion during a recent Cosatu CEC following a report presented by general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi on his experiences of his 'walkabout' in four provinces. The **Labour Bulletin** highlights some of the issues raised in his report, many of which are not new.

The report to the CEC sought to raise the state of the organisation in an 'open and frank manner'. It begins by pointing out the organisation's strengths and then points to the 'threats to our strength', which include:

- service to members and recruitment;
- organisational discipline; and
- public coherence.

SERVICE TO MEMBERS

Vavi gave a number of examples that he came across during his walkabout in Mpumalanga, Free State, Northern Cape and Gauteng. The examples are not an attempt to single out or embarrass any Cosatu affiliates - but rather to indicate the challenges the federation faces. Vavi added that the complaints made by members were not restricted to the unions mentioned:

- Vavi visited Early Bird in Standerton during a strike in March, which was in its sixth week. The two unions organising there were Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) and a Fedusa affiliate, which had recruited members after a number left Fawu. On the resolution of the strike the Fawu shop stewards claimed that the strike had failed with the union abandoning its core demand to ensure parity in wages by accepting an across the board increase for all workers across the various operations. Vavi phoned Fawu's general secretary to inform him of the disillusionment amongst the workers and sought his intervention. The union did not however, send an organiser to discuss the settlement.
- At a workers forum in Middleburg, members of various public sector unions including the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) expressed their anger at the 2004 wage deal and the failure of the union to adequately communicate to members

- A number of examples revealed problems surrounding SA Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu) where the union had lost membership and there were complaints by members and former members about poor service. In one instance, members had joined the union two years ago and had yet to see an organiser or any representative from the union.
 - Various complaints were received from SA Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) members who threatened to resign and join the white union - Solidarity.
 - Similar complaints were expressed about National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) at the Kimberley Hospital where union membership has dropped by more than half.
- Despite, complaints and concerns expressed by workers, Vavi said the federation remained extremely popular with workers. He argued however, that if the unions did not improve services to members they would go elsewhere as competition was rife from legal companies and rival unions. Reasons for poor service, which might vary from union to union, include the following:
- Restructuring had resulted in membership losses in large organisations, while new jobs were occurring in smaller companies or in outsourced activities. The shift to smaller companies has meant that unions have had to allocate more resources to organisational work than in the past. Have unions reviewed their staffing levels in view of this change? Recruiting and servicing members in smaller companies is more labour intensive and organisers need more resources. Do organisers have adequate transport and communications to do what is now required? Shop stewards in these smaller operations also need additional support, as they have to

face a range of complex tasks.

- The management skills of union leaders need to be upgraded.
- The skills needs of organisers and shop stewards have increased but unions have not ensured access to training and education and sufficient legal advice.
- The issue of organisational development has been raised repeatedly in the federation, but few unions have followed this up. Cosatu itself failed to drive the organisational development project consistently, partly as a result of a lack of resources.

ORGANISATIONAL INDISCIPLINE

The report highlighted that organisational indiscipline manifests itself mainly in the failure by affiliates to implement collective decisions and/or resolutions adopted at congresses or CEC meetings. The following are examples where decisions and/or resolutions adopted have not been implemented or adhered to by affiliates

- It is questionable whether unions have the structures, procedures and resources to ensure the effective implementation of the recruitment campaign.
- Despite a congress resolution, most affiliates have not embarked on an organisational review process.
- What about a coordinated living wage campaign?
- The merger processes between a number of affiliates have not yet got off the ground.
- The resolution to establish a single administration company to administer union retirement funds has not been implemented and 'lies in tatters'. The report argued that the current administration companies such as Old Mutual, Sanlam and NBC had 'learnt the art of using sponsorships, including football and cricket match tickets, to control strategic comrades in the unions...'
- A resolution to sever ties with NBC has also not been implemented.
- A resolution to coordinate discussions around an empowerment deal with Old Mutual was also ignored by affiliates
- A similar experience occurred with the recent Telkom deal, which revealed Cosatu's inconsistency in its rejection of privatisation. The failure to implement resolutions or



decisions could be a result of the following

- The failure of affiliates to come to CEC meetings with proper mandates and then agreeing to programmes which are not implemented.
- Affiliates agree to programmes without evaluating whether they can afford to resource them.
- The status of union investment companies is becoming a serious public embarrassment as they often lie to unions 'The fact is that unions are supposed to control their investment companies and not the other way around'. The challenge lay in ensuring consistency around investment companies

PUBLIC COHERENCE

This issue is related to the failure to implement resolutions adopted and to ensure that 'we are still speaking with one voice at the public level'. The report highlighted a number of instances where the federation's leadership made public comments, which were taken up by the media and create the impression of divisions. One of a number of examples, raised related to the issue of the Deputy President Jacob Zuma. The saga began when Vavi, commenting on Zuma's popularity stated that he could no more be stopped than a tsunami. This was taken to mean that the federation backed Zuma as the next president (see p20). Various union spokespersons responded to this in the media and indicated that this was not an official position, creating the impression of disunity in the federation. Various attempts were made to correct this.

WAY FORWARD

The report stated that a response to organisational problems should be in relation to both the federation and affiliates, which required improved financial and human resources. The report listed a number of interventions, which would be driven by Cosatu as part of an attempt to address concerns around service delivery and training

and education, the organisational review process and to ensure compliance with various resolutions such as those relating to the recruitment drive and union mergers.

Discussion on the report during the May CEC concluded that 'strengthening our organisation requires greater effort to enhance morale and dedication across the labour movement, the allocation of more resources to serve workers in smaller employers and vulnerable sectors; and better strategies for implementing the labour laws, including the management of individual and collective disputes'. A programme of action to improve services to members was endorsed while it was agreed that the following issues, amongst others, be incorporated in a report to be debated at the August Central Committee

- The federation should improve coordination of social dialogue and subsequent report back and mandating processes.
- Management training of office bearers should extend to all levels of leadership in unions.
- A debate should explore whether casualisation, outsourcing and informalisation requires a move towards general unionism or industrial unionism.
- An organisational review process should ensure an assessment of the capacity of each affiliate. In this context the question of deployment and retention of skilled and experienced leadership should be discussed. A related matter is an open debate on the issue of succession in both Cosatu and the ANC.
- An analysis of resources in affiliates and the federation to ensure that there is not a mismatch between capacity to run campaigns and build the organisation and the capacity built to engage at a policy level.

A full report will be the subject of further debate at the August CC.