

# Will bigger be better?

## *forms of union organisation*

**W**orkers file into the offices of the breakaway South African Food and Allied Workers' Union (SAFAWU) on the sixth floor of a building in downtown Johannesburg. One wears a T-shirt bearing the FAWU logo. Two floors below, officials from the FAWU Johannesburg branch office dismiss SAFAWU as the work of "rebel union leaders who divided workers".

Late last year, the FAWU Gauteng region withheld worker subscriptions, citing, amongst other grievances, unresolved financial irregularities and bureaucratic mismanagement. The union head office made it clear it would not tolerate such defiance. Twenty thousand workers were expelled from the union and now form the core of SAFAWU's membership.

There have been at least two other splits within COSATU affiliates in the recent past. The TGWU, which lost a sizeable number of truck drivers to the Turning Wheel Workers' Union in 1996, suffered another breakaway by its members in Pinetown, KwaZulu Natal last month. Quarrels within the CWTU led to the formation of the Western Cape based Oil, Chemical, General and Allied Workers' Union (OCGAWU) in February this year. Declining levels of participation in union structures and a widening chasm between leadership and members, coupled with growing rank-and-file disaffection has fuelled a number of bruising battles

*Tensions and splits in several COSATU affiliates are threatening worker unity: COSATU has decided to concentrate its members in fewer, bigger unions. Malcolm Ray argues that, in the absence of a solid base for unity, such an approach will not work.*

between leadership factions. COSATU's 6<sup>th</sup> national congress noted that "Tensions in some cases (have) led to deep divisions. These have in turn (led) to internal strife, back-stabbing, destructive cliques and criticism".

### **Declining democracy**

Although the reasons for tensions and splits in unions differ markedly, they hinge on common union goals and strategies: democracy, accountable leadership and service provision. The general decline in union democracy and worker control is well documented. In his 1997 survey of the state of union organisation, SWOP researcher, Sakhela Buhlungu, observed a number of sources of organisational malaise.

- *Fiefdoms:* There is a lack of clarity about how union leadership articulate

and represent collective interests. In a number of cases this has led to the emergence of 'fiefdoms' or power bases amongst officials, which then lobby for support (hold 'caucuses') amongst shopstewards, worker office-bearers, and branch regional structures.

- **The 'revolving door':** The exodus of union leaders diminished capacity for the kind of innovations required in the current transition period. High staff turnover remains a problem. The new generation of 'careerist officials' resent and do not fully understand worker control.
- **Individualism:** Old value systems and bonds of solidarity which made union work meaningful in the past have virtually disintegrated. Notions of sacrifice and the collective ethic of the struggle days have been replaced by individualism and a quest for wealth. To a certain extent, union leaders have been influenced by this value shift.
- **Bureaucratisation:** The complexity of union work has resulted in a situation where forms of organisation are driven by the imperatives of efficiency and the need to address complex issues in a changing national and international environment. Unions are unwittingly planting the seeds of what has been termed 'a managerial model' of unionism.
- **Elite pacts:** A culture of 'elite pacting' with business and government around industrial and economic policy issues is emerging. Unions have become dependent on individual leadership interventions in multi-layered negotiations, industry policy formulation processes and investment at the expense of membership participation.

In the late 1980s, researcher, Eddie Webster, noted that as union growth

begins to curve off, subtle changes occur. "The old idealism and militancy declines as a new leadership emerges which is more moderate, accommodating and 'responsible'. A process of goal displacement occurs, as union membership moves closer towards the articulation of the interests of its supposed adversaries, and further away from the interests of the membership."

At the time, Webster concluded that this theory did not apply to unions in COSATU. Until 1991, it was possible to unite black workers under the banner of a struggle for democracy.

### Disorientation

In the current period, social and economic transformation survives as the prime bonding agent. Its adhesive power, though, is weak. There is a pervasive sense of a lack of political direction and confusion about the future of the workers' struggle. Analyst Hein Marais says that, while not in crisis, unions are in flux and prone to a pervasive mood of "(shopfloor) disengagement and disorientation".

Unions now have to engage within a state which, in formal terms, is controlled by a political ally. A union organiser comments: "The whole strategic focus of unionism is unclear. We are not sure what our job is today. Is it to go to Nedlac, or is it to service members?"

Buhlungu adds: "One can no longer assume that unions see the bosses and the state as the political enemy as they did in the 1980s." Union participation in the financial markets has displaced the ideological basis for unity. As author, Gordon Young, puts it: "It seems only yesterday that union congresses were specifically adopting socialism as their creed. With this came the rhetoric of workers' control... Now we hear of transport unions entering the scrap-metal





*Turning Wheel members blockade at Mooi River, 1996*

business; of mining houses entering the transport business, of clothing unions in the furniture business, and everyone in the cellular telephone business”

### **Forms of organisation**

The dominant view within COSATU is that tensions and divisions in affiliates can be solved by addressing the form of union organisation

During the 1980s, the thrust towards industrial unionism provided the core repository of unity. Mergers between different political currents in unions like FAWU, TGWU and SAMWU and the collapse of regionally-based general unions into national industry-specific unions were the order of the day

The racial division of labour led to a union model focussed specifically on unskilled black workers. The particular interests of skilled (predominantly white) categories of workers were

accommodated in relatively small and diverse unions outside COSATU.

Concentration on organising and wage bargaining, the decentralisation of authority and power within organisations along with the overwhelming impulse to unite against apartheid found concrete expression in the principles of worker control, democracy, accountable leadership and open debate.

Today, mergers with smaller unions and the affiliation to COSATU of white-collar unions like SASBO is leading to a redefinition of the old lines of industrial and occupational demarcation. Several affiliates have over 100 000 members. Many more are well above the 50 000 mark.

Industrial unions now operate across more occupational groups. Black workers who have moved into skilled and semi-skilled occupations are joining COSATU affiliates rather than the old craft unions

## New dispensation

The problem of organisation is influenced partly by the passage of legislative changes and the promotion of new collective bargaining structures. The implicitly majoritarian thrust of the LRA has profoundly altered the criteria for union representativity.

Researcher, Ian Macun, points out that "Under the old law, representativity was straightforward... Unions and collective bargaining arrangements were premised on occupational and racial categories of workers in bargaining units." He argues that the new dispensation encourages a shift away from narrowly defined categories of workers and workplaces to representing a cross-section of workers within broadly defined industrial sectors.

In this context, size matters most. A solidified union structure will fit into a centralised collective bargaining regime demarcated along industrial lines. Larger unions will be more powerful and will reduce competition between smaller unions.

## Structure

While the objectives of majoritarianism might be desirable in theory, the experience of union organisation tells a different story. Growth in membership and greater centralisation of bargaining has not been accompanied by a consistent organisational logic. In many cases, unions have been slow in adapting their structure and style of organisation to new conditions. Union structure is an historical creation. Change is a gradual and evolving process. Unions face organisational, political and cultural constraints in moving from narrowly defined forms of organisation to one that is able to represent a more diverse range of interests.

## 'Super unions'

COSATU's response to this situation is spelt out in the recommendations of the

September Commission. The Commission recognises that a simple continuation of traditional forms of organisation and engagement is inappropriate. It compares COSATU with the Norwegian trade union federation and observes that COSATU is strikingly decentralised. It recommends that organisation be centralised in line with the union structure envisaged by the LRA.

Participatory forms of democracy are discarded in favour of "representative" forms of engagement which "empower leaderships to make more decisions" in centralised bargaining fora and tripartite negotiations. The rationale is that "it is not possible for shopfloor structures to keep up with national (economic and industrial) issues". Unions would be able to deal with multi-layer negotiations in a more strategic way.

The Commission also recommends that union structures and jurisdiction be rationalised. This, it is assumed, would make them more efficient. The general approach is to encourage merger activities toward the creation of organisationally inclusive majority, or 'super unions'.

## Implications

The 'super union' formula begs a number of questions:

While there may be organisational and bargaining benefits, larger unions may well lead to larger divisions. The diversity of members' interests increases as size increases, making it difficult to formulate common goals and mobilise members in support of common demands.

The conventional response is to try and reconcile divergent interests through the creation of representative bargaining structures. But this tends to obscure the rationale for union organisation: collective bargaining. Divisions between categories of workers could become more pronounced where wage demands are



adversely affected by agreements set in centralised bargaining forums

Different organisational identities and strategies which have been heavily influenced by the 'apartheid workplace' will weaken the ability of unions to represent a cross-section of workers. Representativity, in most cases, is likely to continue to be determined within the context of old bargaining units.

Less rank and file involvement in decision making could increase the risk of greater centralisation of power and authority. The danger of tensions between membership and leadership and splinter formations is ever-present.

### Lessons

The international union experience points to a number of lessons. In Australia (1995), Britain (since 1979), and more recently, Canada, union merger activity was either driven by the protection of membership (what has been termed 'market-share unionism') or political ideological reasons.

In most instances, a policy of 'defensive rationalisation' was pursued in response to declining membership and political influence in national policy making structures. The outcome differed markedly from country to country. Whereas merger activities in Australia occurred quickly and resulted in divisions among workers and a gap between leadership and membership, the Canadian experience was less



*The decline in union democracy is well documented*

dramatic. In that country, a gradual evolution of general unions into industrial unions took place in Canada. This preceded an internal restructuring process based on 'co-operative relationships' between individual unions. Representativity followed practical concerns like rationalising resources. The merger process and the formation of super unions represented a logical and fairly linear path. The very survival of the unions depended on rationalisation.

In the case of COSATU, the thrust toward bigger unions has an offensive and defensive logic. While the size of unions has increased, the complexity of membership has grown along with degrees of organisational malaise. COSATU affiliates *are* industrial unions. The novelty of the super union concept is the concentration of a wider category of workers in a single organisation.

### Questions

Important questions remain.

- Is the concentration of union membership organisationally viable?

## Bureaucracy

The Commission does attempt to counterbalance the centralisation of leadership by recommending a range of measures to strengthen grassroots organisation and worker control. A new policy-making structure, the Central Committee (CC), will consist of a large delegation of workers from affiliates. The COSATU congress decided that the CC should meet once a year.

At the regional and local level, the Commission recommends greater

involvement of union structures in decision-making through a more direct relationship with national structures. In the Commission's words, "The purposes, role and structure of the locals need to be redefined so that they can once again become centres of innovation and activism." Lower-level structures will have to sharpen their focus on mobilising workers and building worker solidarity on the ground. The national leadership will play an interventionist role in setting national guidelines and resolving disputes and divisions on the ground.

Increasing structural and occupational divisions within the organised working class might not necessarily square with the notion of bigger industrial unions. The danger of mergers lies in forging centralised structures without rationalising the basis for unity and consolidating grassroots organisation.

- While the centralisation of union organisation might be conducive to a slick leadership structure and the rationalisation of resources across affiliates, what are the implications for worker control and democracy? Dysfunctional shopfloor structures could be swallowed up in a bureaucratic morass.
- Does bigger organisation translate to stronger organisation? The organised strength of workers presupposes social cohesion and solidarity. The basis for collective action might be compromised in bigger, more nebulous organisations.
- Can one speak of a common political and bargaining strategy in the context of a culturally and politically stratified membership? The affiliation of craft unions to COSATU has been accompanied by the infusion of elitist cultures and organisational styles in stark contrast to the COSATU tradition. There are no simple answers.

Organisational solutions to divisions and tensions cannot escape the range of contradictions thrown up by the post-apartheid transition. While bigger unions might smooth over some of these contradictions, they could also prompt rebellion amongst members and sow divisions. Unions will have to proceed with extreme caution. ★

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