

# Worker control

by SALB writer DEANNE COLLINS



This article traces the political and organisational origins of the “Worker Control” practice and theory in the South African labour movement from the early 1970’s, finds that it is under serious threat of extinction in the 90’s, and makes a number of proposals towards reviving and sustaining the policy under current conditions.

In South Africa, the principle of worker control has very specific theoretical and organisational roots. The re-emergence of militant trade unions in the 1970’s was linked to a radical ferment amongst left academics and students who consciously advocated a more participatory notion of socialism than had been previously put into practice in other countries.

## “Laboratories for Democracy”

For these activists, the trade unions were, in the words of Alec Erwin, to become “laboratories for democracy,” in which workers would be trained and empowered to take control, not only of their workplaces, but, ultimately, of every aspect of their lives. Control of their unions was the first step towards a society in which workers would resist anybody – government, employers, political activists, and even their own leaders – who tried to make decisions for them.

For the emerging unions, the principle of worker control had, of course, a practical as well as an ideological component. The new unions were confronted by a hostile state and equally hostile employers. Denied legal recognition, and with recognition by employers for many years practically unachievable, there was little chance of the unions developing into bureaucratic organisations. Unions existed outside the factory gates, with victimisation and dismissal a constant threat to members. Money and other resources were extremely limited. The issues confronting workers and their unions were very stark: starvation wages, racism on the shop floor, unfair dismissals, the right to bargain.

### After 1973

The 1973 strikes created the beginnings of a new workers' movement in South Africa. Some material gains were made and a new spirit of confidence emerged amongst workers. As 1973 receded, however, so, too, did membership of the fledgling unions that emerged from the strikes. Unionists realised that the key to the survival of the unions was more intensive and structured organisation.

While the position was not uncontested, the majority view was that the only way to survive was to concentrate on organising factory by factory. The unions stressed the need for workers in each plant to elect their own leaders. The emphasis was placed on building "worker leadership" rather than relying on union officials. Shop steward elections became a priority, with workers gathering in the union offices to elect shop steward committees who were often forced to work clandestinely or via the "front" of the works and liaison committees provided for in law at that time. Once shop stewards were in place, the unions began to organise around issues which they had a chance of winning. Through these battles shop stewards began to get a sense of their power- and their need to act on mandates from those who had elected them.

Worker education was a vital tool in the bid to build factory leadership. Although it required a protracted struggle over control, by the mid-1970's the Institute for Industrial Education (IIE) was running shop stewards and organisers courses under the direction of the new unions.

### FOSATU

In April 1979 the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was formed. One of the founding principles of FOSATU was direct worker control. Worker delegates constituted a majority of all structures of the Federation. FOSATU also developed and adopted the idea of Union Branch Executive Committees being composed of delegates from each

workplace, rather than being elected at an Annual General Meeting. Other key FOSATU principles included shopfloor organisation and a stress on developing shop stewards.

Throughout the early 1980's, while union membership grew apace, FOSATU concentrated not only on mobilising, but also on consolidating membership. A comprehensive shop steward education programme was set in place. Unlike the IIE courses, which due to a lack of time and resources and because of the extremely tight "security" surveillance from the state, restricted themselves to imparting basic skills to workers, FOSATU broadened education to include courses which would increase the ability of workers to lead both in the factories and outside them. This was to play a key role in building independent worker political leadership.

### Setting up the Locals

FOSATU also began establishing locals or shop steward councils in certain regions. By the end of 1984, there were 22 area-based locals in place. The locals brought together workers from a particular township or industrial area. Workers in the locals provided support to comrades taking up struggles in neighbouring factories and organised the unorganised plants. They also began to take up issues outside of the workplace. "The local was a vibrant centre for worker education and activity and could not be ignored in the formulation of national union policy" (Marie, SALB 16.5).

Friedman describes the situation in the mid-80's as follows :

" (By 1985)... there were up to 150 union meetings taking place throughout the country on most week nights. At all of these, workers were debating not only their factory goals, but political ones too. ...while a few years before workers only listened as the intellectuals held forth, now they placed their own stamp on the debate. ... the dialogue created a worker leadership which had thought through its aims and

strategies and was better able to shape workers' political future." (Friedman, p 497)

### Problems in the 80's

Even by the mid-1980's, however, certain trends had emerged which were to have significant impact on the trade union movement. In a survey on "the state of the unions" published in the SALB in 1985, Lewis and Randall noted some very positive trends. There had been a massive growth in union membership, accompanied by increasing organisational depth. In the sample of 23 of the largest industrial unions, there were 12,462 shop stewards, with 1,443 shop steward councils in place.

There were over 400 recognition agreements, and unions were increasingly challenging management prerogatives and shifting the frontiers of control on the shop floor.

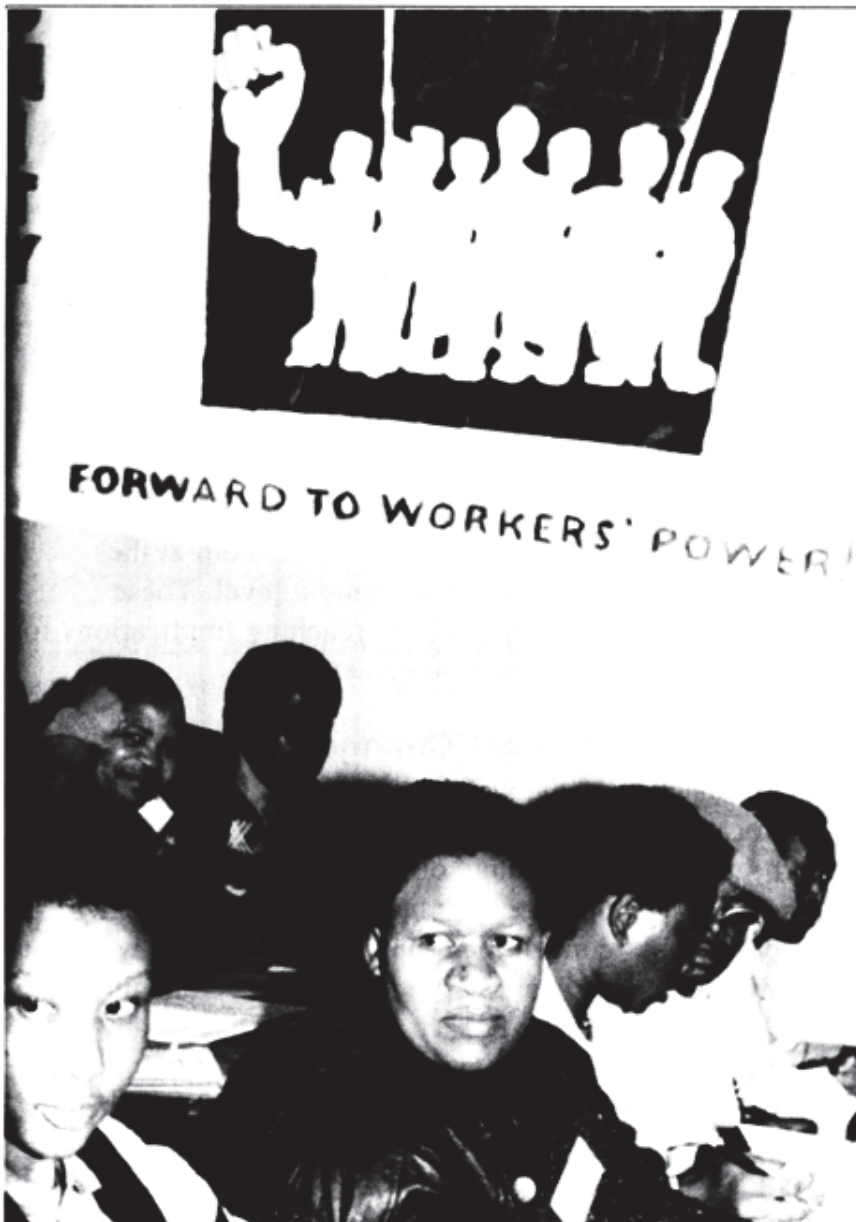
There were also, however, negative indicators : recession had resulted in wholesale dismissals, declining living standards and an increase in retrenchments and unemployment. The unions were forced to consolidate organisation and to explore new strategies to cope with these conditions.

A number of the unions adopted the strategy of greater involvement in the industrial relations machinery. Some joined industrial councils. More use was

made of conciliation, arbitration and the Industrial Court. With the emergence of national political organisations like the UDF during this period, the Unions also began to more openly debate their role in the wider political struggle. The all-important issue of trade union unity was next on the agenda.

### Unity Talks

The issue of worker control became a much-debated issue during the unity talks, which culminated in the launch of COSATU in November 1985. During the talks there was lively debate on organising methods and the relationship between organisation and mobilisation. FOSATU argued strongly that workers on the shop floor should dominate all union structures and



"Workers... should control union officials..."

control union officials and insisted on mandates, report-backs and worker control.(Baskin p31)

### **COSATU**

In the end, the constitution adopted at COSATU's launching congress ensured that all structures would contain a majority of worker delegates. In addition, large worker-controlled meetings and congresses were seen as central to ensuring mass participation in decision making. Much emphasis was placed on the role of the locals, which were seen as the base unit of organisation. (Baskin p58). These structures have remained largely unchanged to the present day.

A massive strike wave followed COSATU's birth. Union membership increased at an enormous rate. Apart from the organisational pressures which this created, COSATU also suffered the brunt of state repression, following on successive declarations of states of emergency. There can be no doubt that the emphasis on building structures at shop floor level, and on not relying on union offices and officials, were largely responsible for the survival of the Federation at this time. In particular the role of the shop stewards councils was crucial. They assisted in organisational work and developed ordinary worker leadership. The locals confronted the political issues of the day and developed resistance in practice.

### **Challenges of the late 80's**

To have simply survived this period was an achievement for COSATU. At the same time, however, a number of problems emerged during the late 1980's which contain the roots of the problems being faced by the Federation today. At the end of 1987 the COSATU National

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Office Bearers conducted an assessment of COSATU. This revealed a number of weaknesses : local structures were weak and the COSATU regions were, with few exceptions, not functioning. The Federation had failed to build the Living Wage Campaign, arguably the most important of its campaigns. This was linked to the failure to achieve centralised bargaining in most sectors. In addition, COSATU's education programme, so crucial to the development of worker leadership, was also not functioning properly.

### **Political Differences**

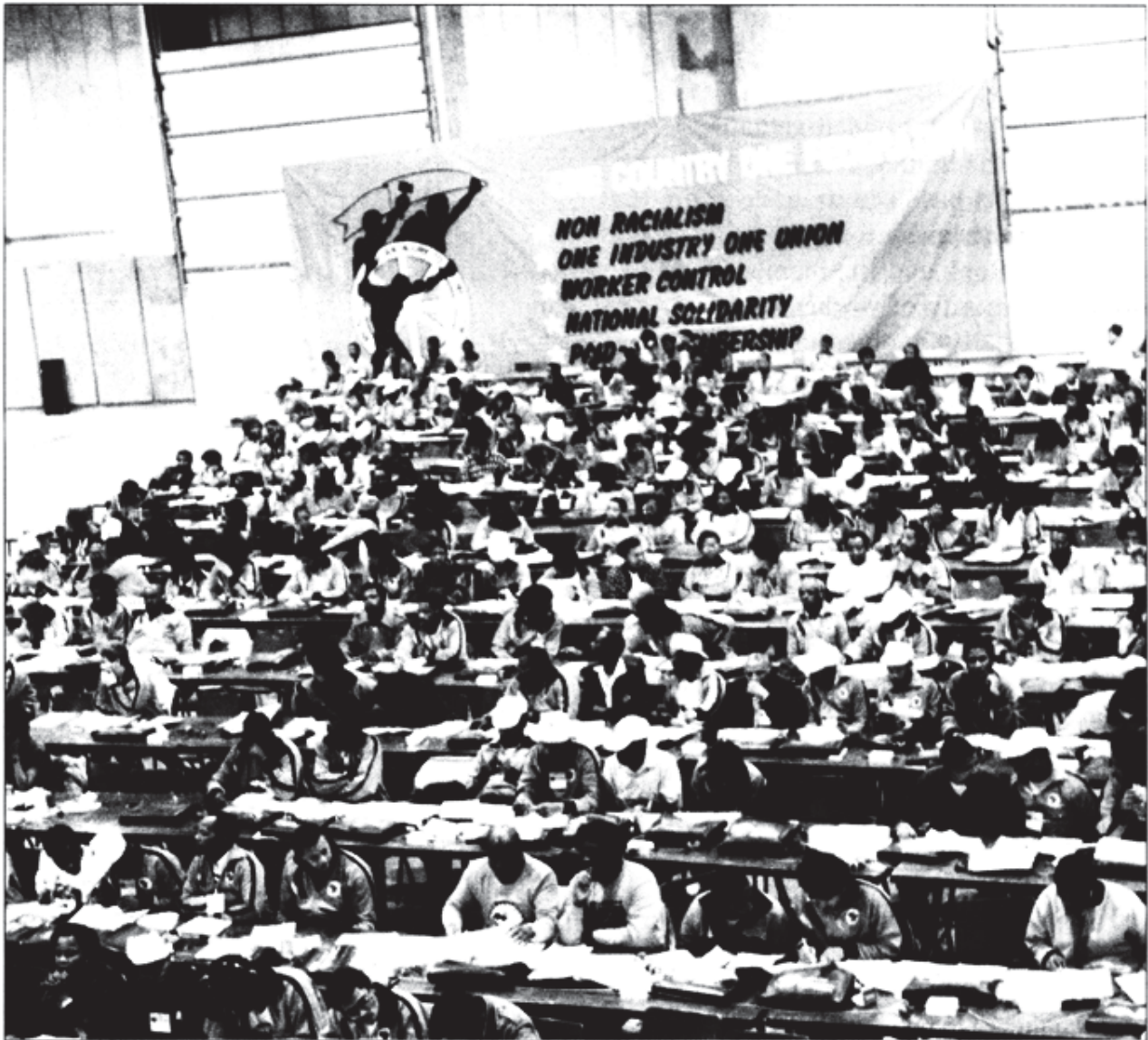
The Office Bearers' assessment also noted that political differences within and amongst the affiliates were weakening the Federation. In at least one affiliate (CCAWUSA), these were to result in a split. The focus of the differences, which has been characterised as the “populist/workerist” debate, was around the role of the unions and where they should be concentrating their energies : on mobilising on the broader liberation front, or on developing the unions per se.

### **COSATU in the 1990's**

The 1990's have seen a number of critical changes in South Africa, both at the political and economic level. These changes have far-reaching implications for the labour movement.

### **Political Changes**

At the political level, the changes ushered in in 1990 confronted COSATU with a fresh range of challenges. COSATU and its predecessors have served both as a conventional union movement as well as a resistance front (Marie). The opening up of political space after 1990 has meant that the unions are now in a position to directly extend their influence beyond industry to the national economy. The strategy adopted by COSATU with regard to this involvement as well as its determination to “influence” the policies of the ANC in



Worker control has been a defining feature of COSATU: the 1989 congress at NASREC

particular, has resulted in the Federation becoming involved in a wide range of policy issues.

### **Collective Bargaining**

At the same time, the collective bargaining scenario has also undergone major changes. Basic worker rights are now guaranteed in law for most workers. Prolonged recession, coupled with the need to service an ever-growing membership, has further entrenched the move from plant level to centralised bargaining. The restructuring initiatives of state and capital have put new, more complex issues on the agenda. The shift in management style to "participative management" also creates

new challenges.

It is clear that some of the strategies adopted in response to these challenges have resulted in major problems for the unions, and that the result has been a steady erosion of worker control.

### **Policy Making**

At the level of policy, COSATU adopted a number of strategies. The first was to intervene in policy making, particularly on macro-economic issues. This necessitated using the services of a number of groupings outside of the labour movement. The MERG and ISP are obvious examples, but the Federation and a number of the affiliates themselves have brought in

“experts” on a wide range of policy issues. Some have even been directly employed. Whilst many of these groupings and individuals have provided valuable services to the unions, it cannot be denied that the effect has been to move policy making further away from the union structures. Rank and file members and even the majority of worker leaders are only marginally involved in the process. As Marie points out it is not easy to send down the structures for debate complex issues that take researchers six to twelve months to formulate in national planning and research groups. Instead, what often happens is that the “policy/workshop/conference” approach is adopted, where selected regional representatives attend a workshop on key policy issues before taking these down to local structures. (Marie, SALB). As one unionist put it, policy has now become “received wisdom” and the result is that the structures are simply “transmission belts” for discussion from above.

While there have been some attempts to use participatory research methods to reverse this trend (the NUMSA research groups and COSATU’s PRP Project come to mind) these have, at best, empowered only a handful of individuals, and the wider problems remain.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme is an obvious example of this process. While the title of the programme may be known to many, workers at grass roots level do not have a clear understanding of the complexities of the RDP.

### **Negotiating Forums**

Having formulated policy, the second prong of the strategy is to get this policy accepted by other forces. Such has been the eagerness to achieve this, that COSATU and its affiliates became involved in “every negotiating forum under the sun.” An enormous amount of time and energy has been devoted to this process and, as in the area of policy

formulation, it has had severe consequences for the unions. Key union officials and worker leaders have been all but removed from their organisations while they participate in the fora. Furthermore, it is clear that these representatives often go to the negotiations without clear mandates either from the Federation or their unions and that in many instances they are merely there in their individual capacities. Where report backs are given at the local level, they are often presented as top-down reports with little room for debate. They are often not discussed at all, in favour of dealing with more local issues.

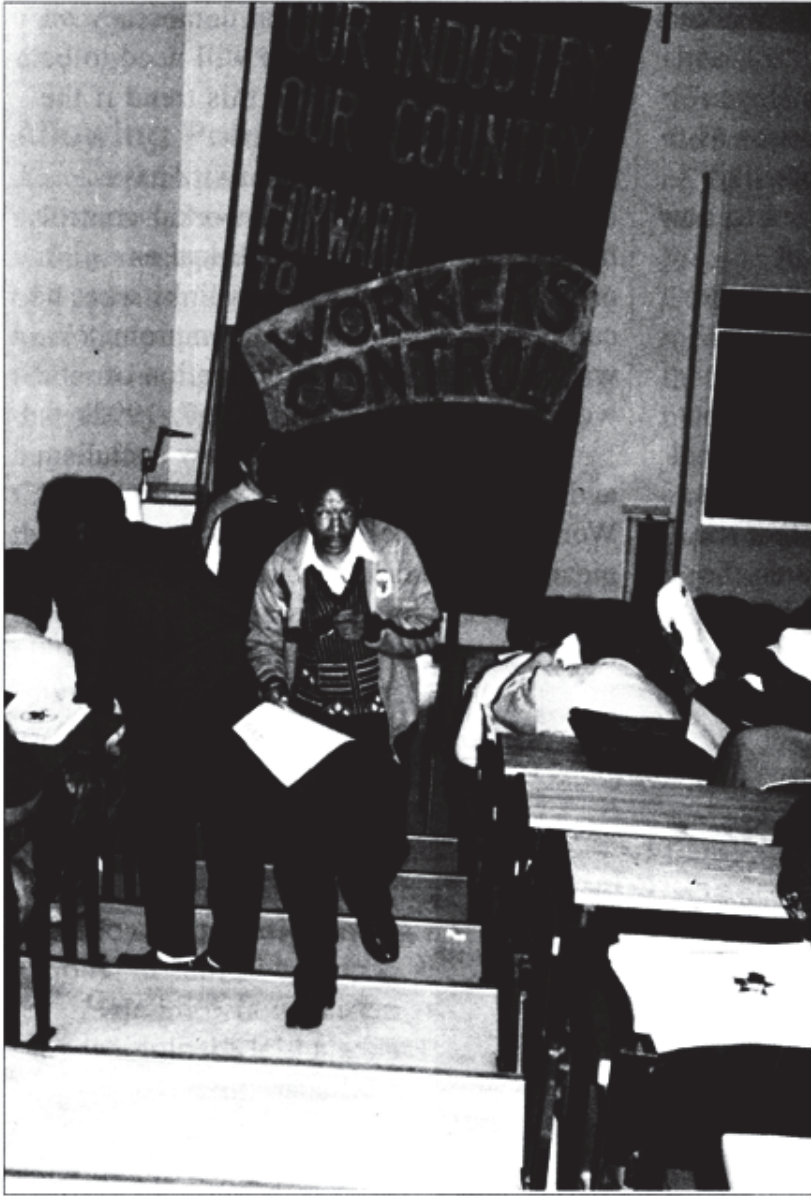
Similar trends may be discerned at the level of negotiations with management. Centralised bargaining arrangements mitigate against the direct process of mandating and report back practised in the past. Moreover, as in the negotiating fora, the focus has shifted away from the bread and butter issues to which workers can easily relate. Complex negotiations around grading, training schemes and re-organisation of production impact significantly on the ability of members on the ground to participate.

### **A Weakening of Worker Control**

The impact of these trends on worker control became apparent some time ago. An SALB survey conducted in 1992 found a “general trend towards the weakening of workers control.” Workers and officials interviewed at the time pinpointed a number of factors which contributed to this :

A major issue was the lack of education and training for shop stewards. Whilst COSATU itself has spent much time and resources in developing training programmes, relatively few shop stewards have access to these. Education in the affiliates is very uneven, and in some cases seems to have gone backwards rather than forwards, as Education Officers and worker educators are pulled into other areas of union work.

Bureaucratic tendencies have become



1990: Involvement of shop stewards in centralised bargaining

evident both at COSATU and affiliate level. These tendencies are not restricted to officials, but extend to worker leaders as well. As Marie points out, this results from “the inability to find solutions to the tensions between national decisions and local initiative, between efficiency and participation”

The survey also pointed to the dominance of union officials and to the fact that many officials coming into the trade unions in the 1990’s have a very different attitude towards the movement compared with officials of the past. There is a tendency to see union work as a “job” rather than a commitment. Furthermore, with the weakening of shop steward

structures, it is easier for ambitious officials to build a power base. A number of shop stewards complained about organisers, who have no experience of working in a factory or other workplace, “controlling us instead of us controlling them.” (SALB 16,5)

### **COSATU Reflects**

A more recent analysis by COSATU general secretary, Sam Shilowa, notes the following:

- In COSATU Constitutional meetings, very little time is given to discussion of trade union work. Affiliates come to these structures without proper briefing or mandates, and are as a result “often surprised by the outcome of meetings.” There is very little report back to members from these meetings.
- Workers are complaining about the lack of service and involvement in decision-making.
- General meetings, a hard-

won right, are, in many cases no longer being held at the workplace.

- In most areas locals either do not exist or are not being attended by shop stewards and officials

He concludes that, by and large, union members have become “spectators in the organisation.”

The observations made by Shilowa are not new. In the main part, they repeat observations made by the COSATU office bearers in 1987. The fact that they have to be repeated points to the urgency for solutions to be found to the problems.

### **Only a Slogan?**

In the course of the SALB survey, a

national union leader commented “Workers are losing and losing workers control, and it is in danger of becoming just a slogan” (SALB 16,5) The question then arises as to whether worker control will, rather like socialism, remain a slogan, referred to now and again when it is convenient, or whether the unions have the will and the capacity to change the situation.

To abandon worker control is to abandon union democracy, and to accept that bourgeois democracy – that is, formal democracy empty of any ongoing, direct control by members – is the best that the trade union movement can do, given the conditions in South Africa in the 1990’s. Given that there is a strong tendency for

this to be the only form of democracy on offer in our society, there will need to be a strong movement against this trend if the situation is to change.

Rob Rees and Alan Horwitz have argued that the erosion of worker control has as much to do with political as organisational factors. Rees links what he calls the “politics of class compromise” with a decline in the participation of workers in unions. (SALB 16,7, 1992)

In the 1970’s, unionists saw socialism and worker control as inextricably bound. Worker control of unions was seen as a means to worker control of production and society as a whole. It is a significant irony that in the 1990’s, the unions are

struggling to return to worker control of their own organisations, with control of production and society an ever receding possibility. A recommitment to worker control will thus of necessity also involve substantial ideological soul-searching.

Assuming the will, what are the ways in which the Unions need to change in order to ensure a return to worker control?

### **Countering Bureaucratisation**

There are some who argue that bureaucratisation is an inevitable tendency in organisations, and that trade unions are no exception to this rule. An impressive body of theory exists on this subject. The same theorists point out that one of the ways in which this “law” could be checked is by an acknowledgement of bureaucratic tendencies and



“... Fashionable to portray workers as a privileged elite”



a strong commitment to democracy as an ideology.

### **Allowing Political Differences**

An essential part of this commitment is the acknowledgement of differing opinions within an organisation, and the existence of opposition groupings which at least have the potential to overthrow existing leadership. Jeremy Baskin has pointed out that the system of "majoritarian hegemony" currently practised by COSATU and its affiliates places limits on the democratic process and needs to be reconsidered. There has been an increasing tendency to actively discourage opposition views within the unions and to stifle any form of real debate.

### **Full-time Worker Leaders?**

Given the growing tendency for union officials to dominate, there have been suggestions that there should be more full-time worker leaders, ranging from the national office-bearer to the shop steward level. While there may be merits in this suggestion, it should also be treated with caution. Experience has shown that full-time shop stewards can become removed from shop floor issues, and reproduce the bureaucratic and anti-democratic tendencies exhibited by some union officials. This is a particular danger where there are long, or unlimited terms of office. If this course is to be followed, there would need to be careful consideration of measures that ensure that worker leaders are linked directly into their constituencies.

### **Back to Basics**

The problem cannot be solved solely at leadership level. For real workers control to be implemented steps have to be taken to ensure that ordinary workers once again become intimately involved in their organisations, and that these organisations accurately reflect the real needs and concerns of their members.

COSATU is attempting to address the

problems it has identified through a "back to basics" campaign. While the details of this are not yet clear, it involves "pursuing the interests of working people, regardless of the twists and turns which government takes" (Coleman, quoted in Finance Week). The question of strengthening COSATU structures and servicing members have now been put at the top of the agenda of COSATU constitutional meetings.

It has become fashionable in certain circles to portray workers as privileged individuals, who are far better off than large sections of our society. Be that as it may, there are workers in many sectors of our economy who are working and living under extremely poor conditions. Minimum wages on the mines, the farms and in the public and service sectors are well below poverty levels. South Africa has an appalling health and safety record. Moreover, employed workers bear the direct consequences of high unemployment, with most workers supporting unemployed family members.

### **Campaigns on the Ground**

Retrenchments, child care, parental leave and social benefits are all issues which beg for attention. "Back to basics" should involve major campaigns around concrete, popular issues, to be determined by workers at the local level. An open, democratic atmosphere needs to be established in local union structures, with the involvement of active workers, not only formally elected representatives, being encouraged. If this is achieved, then the rebuilding of union structures, and the revitalisation of the locals – which are crucial indicators of worker control – should almost automatically follow.

Current realities mean that many of these issues may well still be negotiated at central level. Centralised bargaining does not of itself, however, necessarily mean that workers cannot be involved. NUMSA has managed, in varying degrees, to continue to receive mandates and give

reportbacks at the local level, while bargaining at the Industrial Councils. Ways of ensuring that this process continues need to be explored by all the affiliates. National agreements should open up scope for workplace and regional bargaining.

Negotiations on policy issues at central level will continue. COSATU has already announced its intention to limit its participation in forums, but methods will have to be found to ensure that the participation that does take place reflects the opinions of ordinary union members. In this regard, education and communication are areas which require urgent attention.

### Education

The education programmes of COSATU and the affiliates need to be reassessed and strengthened. Substantial resources need to be devoted to staff training.

### Communication

A great deal of attention needs to be given to communication skills and to the process of rendering issues more understandable to workers. Although much of the technological capacity exists, in many

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instances the way in which the technology is used is in itself hampering the process of communication. Before the advent of faxes, a general secretary would write a short report on a negotiation, for widespread dissemination

amongst members. Now, the tendency is simply to fax the verbatim agreement to the regional office, where it tends to go no further. Organisers communicate with shop stewards by fax and visit the workplaces less and less often. Affiliate and COSATU CEC's have become endless paper chases, with most delegates spending much of their time trying to find the document on the issue at hand amongst the 300 or so pages they have been issued.

### Democratisation

Finally, there needs to be a careful examination and debate of current structures and representation at all levels of the unions and the Federation. As Baskin points out "developing union structures which deepen democracy, give direct power to ordinary members and maintain organisational vibrancy is one of the key challenges COSATU faces." (p460). ☆

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**"Current representation at all levels needs to be carefully examined"**

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