

Workers' control and democracy

Case of Fawu

In this article former general secretary **Jan Theron** argued that a tight caucus had taken over the union, employing purges and untruths to do so. This article is a shorter version of an article that was published in Volume 15, Number 3, September 1990.

Earlier this year I received a message. It was a message from workers I had helped organise at a time when organising workers into the union was an uphill battle. That union was FCWU, one of the unions which later merged to become Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu). The message was that workers wanted me to take them back to FCWU.

I went to the workers, and listened to what they had to say. They were people we knew well, and regarded as amongst the best of the worker leadership of Cape Town. Some had played a leading role in building the Cape Town branch, after it had been defunct for some 20 years, into the largest branch of FCWU.

BOSSSES IN THE UNION

What they told me was that there were bosses in the union. People in the offices took decisions. What the workers had to say no longer counted. Their officials had been dismissed.

Now the national executive committee (NEC) had expelled worker leaders. The union head office had been quick to write to the bosses (to say they should not recognise these workers as shopstewards, and stop deducting their subs). But they had not

bothered to tell the workers who had elected them.

It was only some time later, that the head office convened a meeting of the branch. Some of the workers I spoke to had been at this meeting. This is what they told me. There were people there from the head office, and others who were not introduced. There was no discussion. Workers were told, what the NEC has decided is final. Anyone who challenges the NEC will go the same way as the expelled workers.

The bosses in the factory could see that the workers had no support from their office and were taking advantage of the division in the union. The situation in the factories was very bad. Also it seemed the head office was shifting closer to the bosses. They had moved into a new building, which it was said they had bought from Premier Group. But no one was clear where the money had come from. One of the workers showed me a copy of a letter from their manager to the union head office, agreeing to give R500 towards moving into the building.

Was it possible that workers had been misinformed, even misled? Something about how they were, more than what they said, impressed me as the truth. These were not

the proud and spirited workers I remembered. Something bad had happened to them. They were like people who have been beaten.

But they had not given up fighting. They were fighting for something they had known: for democracy. I explained my position to them. I had an agreement with the union to take unpaid leave, to write. However, after I had left the agreement had been changed. If I wanted to return to the union, I had to apply again, as though I had never worked for the union.

I advised them that it was not possible for workers to try and go back to the union as it used to be. It was also no solution to break away, and form a new union. Far better to try fight against the way things were going, from inside the union. In other words to oppose the leadership in power, all distinct from the union itself. Not because of who they are, but because of their practices.

What practices? It is to try and understand this that I decided to write about what is going on in the union. I am writing first of all for the workers in the union; not only the workers I spoke to, who can see there is something wrong, but also those who do not.



Workers listen carefully at a meeting.

While I for my own part accept that I am not able to return to the union, the workers have no alternative. At the same time I believe the workers are entitled to something better.

This is a question I have thought about a good deal, not least because I know I will be attacked for speaking out about what is going on. Precisely because I am loyal to the union, this is painful to me.

There are in general two reasons why someone loyal to the unions does not make public what is going on in the unions. First, because only people inside the organisation are able to solve the problems of the organisation. Second, so as not to give ammunition to the enemies of the union movement. I take as my point of departure that the internal democracy of organisations must at all times be respected.

However, this presupposes that there is internal democracy. And while the problems of the organisation can only be solved by the members, a union does not belong to the leadership in power. A union is a working-class organisation which exists for future generations of workers as it has for past generations.

Moreover, where the main threat to the unions is external, i.e. the bosses or the state, then it is necessary and correct that the union should be protected.

However, what I shall argue is that the main danger now is from within. It is the danger of internal corruption. A union which is organisationally corrupt is a liability for the whole progressive union movement.

In any case one cannot be giving ammunition to the enemies of the union movement, when the enemies of the union movement know all about the internal problems of a union anyway. The events that have given rise to this article are public knowledge. There have been court proceedings and press reports about them. There have been open letters, pamphlets and memoranda of various kinds. The bosses employ analysts to try to make sense of this kind of material, so as to decide what is in the situation for them.

In such a situation, a conspiracy of silence can only benefit a leadership which does not wish to be held accountable for its actions. Those who remain in the dark are usually ordinary people, like the members.

WHY SHOULD IT MATTER?

But why should it matter what is going on in Fawu? Why is it of any significance what a group of workers in the Cape Town branch are saying? So far as the national leadership is concerned, it does not seem to matter.

A press statement to *South* newspaper says it is a problem blown out of all proportion. This is also the line Allan Roberts (one of three national organisers in the union head office) takes in an article in the *Labour Bulletin* 15. 2. Thus for the fact that 'not a single factory has withdrawn from the Cape Town branch' shows that all is well. Moreover, the lack of response from the progressive community in general, seems to confirm that what has happened in Cape Town is seen not to matter.

However, the fact that there has been so little response is in itself significant. It shows a lack of concern for what is happening in organisations on the ground, which would have been unthinkable some years ago. For what is at issue is a question of unity. At a time when there is the potential of progressive political change, unity is all important. More than this, what is at issue is workers' control and democracy in the unions. The position I shall take is that there is no issue that matters more in the unions today than the changing meaning of workers' control and democracy.

ARTICLE BY ALLAN ROBERTS

What is significant is the tone adopted in the article by Allan Roberts in response to an

objective and restrained article by Di Cooper raising certain important issues. Allan Roberts launches a personal attack on the dismissed branch secretary. He states as fact, things I know to be untrue and which can be shown to be untrue.

To answer each and every misrepresentation and misstatement of fact in Allan Roberts' article would divert from the real issues. What does he say about the question of unity?

According to him, since the union's conference in September 1988 'a fairly high degree of unity has been achieved to date in that debate and discussions flow freely and decisions are reached in the NEC without any region or group of individuals feeling suppressed'. It is no coincidence that he refers to unity in the NEC as I shall show. Unity at this level is what is important for him.

What are the facts? A split in the union in the Eastern Cape and the establishment of a Campaign for Democracy in Cape Town indicate a high degree of disunity. From my own contacts with the union, I would describe the climate on the ground as one of fear.

However, it must also be said that the way he has responded is consistent in tone with some of the pamphlets that have been put out by the national leadership. In fact they all follow the same pattern. What is this pattern? The broad issues are not confronted. Instead issues are personalised, and clouded with allegations.

WHAT ARE THE BROADER ISSUES?

At a time when workers everywhere are discussing the contents of a Workers' Charter, the lesson of what has happened in the Cape Town branch is of wider significance. For workers' control and democracy is central to what a Workers' Charter is all about. But how are they to be safeguarded?

A question of unity

What do the workers I spoke to really mean, when they say they want to go back to the union they belonged to before? If we want to ignore what workers are saying, we can label them reactionary as workers who don't want progress. But it is clear that these workers don't (see what is going on now as progress.) What kind of unity is it when workers want no part of it?

Unity can be imposed from the top down or organised from the bottom up. Which way organisations choose to operate has longer term implications. It goes to shape the political culture we inhabit.

A political culture in which unity is imposed from the top down is a culture which emphasises the authority of leadership and conformity amongst the membership.

What is important is loyalty to the flag. Differences are not expressed and dissidence is dealt with by repression. It is moreover an anti-working class culture, whatever it claims or aspires to be.

On the other hand a political culture in which unity is built from the bottom up is one which emphasises organisation and the accountability of leadership. The open expression of differences is encouraged and dissidence is tolerated. What is important is loyalty to the ideas on which the organisation is based or from which it draws its legitimacy.

Workers' control and democracy

When the unions that merged to form Fawu went about building unity, each contributed in its own way towards a broader political culture. I will take the example of FCWU by way of illustration since this is mainly the tradition of workers' control and democracy that workers in the Cape Town branch come from. In 1976 FCWU was on its last legs. The general secretary had been drawing two

salary cheques for each one to which he was entitled. The administrator had misappropriated a sum of money which she was still repaying when I stopped working 12 years later. Corruption was rife throughout the union; not only in the sense of misuse of money, but in that the leadership in place in factories and branches was in it for itself. Workers had lost confidence in the union.

The problem then was how to regain workers' confidence, and rebuild the union. This was done by organising workers around the idea that the union belonged to the workers who contributed to it, and that it was the workers themselves who should decide what went on in their organisation. There was, in other words, a strong emphasis on workers' control and democracy in the union, along with financial self-sufficiency and political independence. There was further a strong emphasis on honest administration and honest leadership. Workers' control and democracy in the union was more than a slogan. It was a practice.

This explains in large part the success not only of FCWU, but the union movement it was part of, in winning over the mass of unorganised workers. For this was the principle task facing the emergent unions at the time. It was done, not only against the opposition of the bosses and state, but also against the established union movement. Workers' control and democracy was what distinguished the practice of the emergent unions from the established union movement in particular TUCSA.

On paper workers' control and democracy is safeguarded in Fawu. The first safeguard is the union's constitution. Because this is the first safeguard, it is the duty of the national office bearers, first and foremost, to 'enforce observance of the constitution.' But because no constitution can cover every

eventuality, the union adopted a number of additional policy documents.

In 1986 certain Basic Principles were adopted, amongst them workers' control and democracy. The following year a Leadership Code was adopted. In 1988 Guidelines on Administration and Finance were adopted, as well as Guidelines on Elections.

Yet the lesson of what has happened in the Cape Town branch is that unless workers' control and democracy is grounded in everyday practice, and unless there is also leadership which is committed to this practice, what is on paper is no certain safeguard.

Any leadership can claim to be building workers' control and democracy. Furthermore, where there is no workers' control and democracy, there will be no one to contradict them.

For what is at issue is fundamental to workers' control and democracy: the right of workers to elect and discipline their own leadership. The entire branch leadership was removed, and the leading official of the branch dismissed at a general meeting presided over by the national office bearers. All this was done, as I shall later explain, in obvious violation of the constitution. Moreover, the violation of the constitution was not just technical. It enabled a decision to be made which was undemocratic.

A question of power

It should come as no surprise that the national leadership of a union should disregard workers' control and democracy in the union. For only to the extent that there is workers' control and democracy are the powers of leadership constrained.

The history of Fawu since it was formed is of an ongoing power struggle. That is to say a struggle for leadership position. A reading of the Annual Reports in the period

1986- 1988 shows that this is a major cause of disunity in the union. As the workers have been saying for some time there are people who are power-hungry. They practise leadership control not workers' control. To explain why there have been these power struggles, it is necessary to look beyond the personalities involved.

Whereas at an earlier stage workers in leadership were ordinary workers drawn from production, there is nowadays a different kind of worker leadership emerging. Increasingly this is a leadership which is separated from the ordinary workers both in terms of education and its position in production. Partly this is because the composition of the membership has changed. Whereas formerly the membership was overwhelmingly made up of ordinary workers in unskilled and semi-skilled positions, there are today members in clerical and skilled positions. Partly this is because the union is now a large institution, and a position in leadership means power and influence. So the union has become attractive to a range of people who were never attracted to it before.

But there is an additional reason why there have been ongoing struggles about power. For the emphasis on workers' control and democracy gave rise to a project of building power (from below), in which the process was what was important, and the object was to prevent power being concentrated at the top. The emphasis here is on power at a local level, where there is the least separation between membership and leadership.

However, from the time of the merger there has been a faction in Fawu with a different view of power, and a different political project. For them, power is located at the top. It is an instrument to be used whichever way leadership wants. Whether power is turned to good or bad use is simply a question of whether the leadership in power is 'good' or 'bad'.

The political project this gives rise to, is for a faction to seize power. Further, it is to centralise power. The more centralised power is, the better use they will be able to make of it. Further, the relationship to membership is that of a chain of command. In this way everything is justified in the pursuit of power.

But power for whom? Leadership will always claim to act for the highest motives. They are not in it for themselves, but for the workers they represent. But what is to stop leadership from pursuing its own interests in power?

It is easy to say that when leadership no longer represents workers, the workers can elect another. But even if they have this right on paper, that does not mean they will be able to exercise it. What is to stop the leadership from abusing their power? That is, turning their power against the membership to consolidate their own position. The constitution can be disregarded. Meetings can be rigged. There are any number of ways a leadership so inclined can strengthen its hold on power. Trading on the ignorance and disorganisation of workers.

For power it is said, corrupts. What I take to be corruption in an organisation, is not simply the most obvious form of corruption, where leadership abuses its position for its own material gain. It is corruption in the broad sense, where leadership abuses a position of trust to consolidate its own hold on power. An organisation for the members becomes an organisation to further the aims of the leadership. The control the workers are supposed to have over leadership becomes the power leadership has over workers.

Workers basically have to carry out instructions and leadership resorts to ever more drastic methods to legitimate its hold on power.

Stalinism

Stalinism is a clear example of the abuse of power. How was it possible that forced labour camps, political terror and the dictatorship of a single leader in the USSR were justified in the name of socialism and the working class? Two of the political methods of Stalinism are significant here.

First, history was falsified; actual events were deliberately distorted to present leadership in the best possible light. What was true was what suited leadership, and as a result all meaning was corrupted, and the truth was literally stood on its head.

Second, there were the purges. A purge is where a leadership in power is no longer willing or able to allow political differences be expressed, or to resolve political or organisational differences democratically. Instead it deals with opposition administratively, that is, by removing it. In the time of Stalin one way of doing this was by means of show trials, where authentic leaders were accused on trumped-up charges of things they never did.

But what is the relevance of Stalinism today? Stalinism is still relevant because the political methods of Stalinism live on in the political practice of organisations.

The wholesale dismissal of Fawu officials and the expulsion of workers bears all the marks of a purge. Moreover, in their presentation of 'facts', the truth is habitually stood on its head by the present national leadership. ^{LB}

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Interview with Joe Slovo

Joe Slovo speaks about building a legal, mass Communist Party, about post-apartheid South Africa, about socialism and social democracy, and about theoretical issues in Marxism. Slovo also discusses his paper 'Has Socialism Failed?' which, he says 'was written essentially for discussion within our own party and broad liberation movement, but it seems also to have provoked a lot of interest within our Southern Africa region and in Europe'. The *South African Labour Bulletin* and the magazine *New Era* interviewed Joe Slovo separately. We publish the combined interview. This article was published in Volume 14, Number 8, 1990.

Labour Bulletin: The South African Communist Party (SACP) intends emerging publicly in the coming months, and actively recruiting thousands of new members. Under such conditions would it be a vanguard party or a mass party? Would new members be selected according to rigorous criteria, or would individuals be able to apply for membership?

Slovo: We envisage a large party. We have to break out of the old conspiratorial mould.

We have got to make an impact in the situation, and only a political party which attracts a wide cross-section of the working class nationally, in particular, and other

sympathetic strata can carry out its role. In building an above-board SACP that will be able to earn its title of vanguard, we will certainly seek to recruit into our ranks the most dedicated, disciplined militants drawn, in particular, from the ranks of the working people. But our continued emphasis on a vanguard role, and on quality in our membership, must not stand in the way of building a relatively large SACP.

There is no doubt that people who want to join the party are welcome to make approaches. Indeed, even during the illegal period we did not simply sit back and select who to approach. It was a combination of that and initiatives