

Workers tell the ANC: **'We love you, but watch it'**

*In the build-up to the elections there was some speculation – in view of tensions which emerge from time to time between Cosatu and the ANC – as to whether the ANC would continue to be an automatic choice for workers. The election results reflected that support for the ANC had continued – as did a survey conducted by SWOP and the HSRC. The **Labour Bulletin** highlights the key points raised by **Sakhela Buhlungu** during his presentation on the findings of the survey.*

The survey, conducted amongst 633 Cosatu members in five regions, reveals a strong committed not only to representative democracy but to supporting the ANC and the continuation of the alliance. Is this a surprise? In the build-up to the election much was made of voter apathy, signs of a lack of enthusiasm towards the ANC and the elections and general growing anti-ANC sentiment that might have been created amongst Cosatu members following numerous campaigns attacking ANC policy in recent years.

As mentioned in the previous *Labour Bulletin*, the Democratic Alliance attempted to ride on this anti-ANC sentiment to mobilise worker support. Coupled with this is the

perception that there is a growing gap between Cosatu leadership and members on the ground. However, the survey results largely reveal that the national leadership might be more cynical about the alliance than the membership who view the ANC as 'our party'. However, in the main the survey results largely reflect a convergence of views around support for the ANC and the alliance. Where some dissonance might exist is in the extent to which Cosatu national/leadership messages are being communicated and reported properly to members. This was evident in the low levels of knowledge around Nedlac and even to some extent Gear. This raises an interesting question about what information is

being filtered down to members.

An indication of how democracy is being consolidated, was the high level of maturity shown by Cosatu members in their understanding of the difference between workplace-based interests and national interests. This was revealed in the large number of workers who indicated that they would prefer a political party that represents a broader set of interests while a further 36% said a party must represent the interests of all South Africans even if this means that worker interests will be sacrificed.

While the survey reveals strong support for the ANC, the results reflect the different facets of Cosatu, as an organisation. What tends to be forgotten is that its membership does



not all come from the congress tradition and does not all support the ANC, although the overwhelming majority do. Some interesting signs were the fact that 15% of those interviewed indicated that Cosatu should not be aligned with any political party. It is interesting to see that there was little talk of a workers' party, with only 7% claiming that Cosatu should form its own party. It is also significant that 16% of workers would not say who they planned to vote for.

Aside from the political implications of the results, the survey reveals some organisational challenges that the federation has been grappling with for some time. The average Cosatu member is increasingly becoming more

skilled and employed in full-time, permanent jobs. This raises questions about the future viability of having only members who hold formal sector jobs which are constantly under threat. Analysts and sociologists point to the need for Cosatu to begin to focus on other areas to ensure it grows its powerbase. Are we trying to shift struggles by arguing that the formal sector is shrinking, the informal is being ignored and the potential growth sector lies in the latter?

An argument promoted by Cosatu's economist Neva Makgetla was that the federation should not ignore the informal sector but at the same time it could not ignore the formal sector which only had 40% union density. The

growth of the informal sector, not peculiar only to SA, brings into focus the questions around who speaks on behalf of those outside the formal sector. It is interesting to note that 60% strongly agreed (and a further 28% agreed) that unions should have active links with community and other structures such as social movements.

Finally, the survey reveals the extent to which labour relations have become more institutionalised. This is partly revealed by the fact that 40% of workers interviewed had not been involved in strikes since 1999. While this could reflect the institutionalisation of labour relations it could also be a sign of insecurity over jobs - The editor.

The survey was conducted in January and February this year. This marked the third survey of its kind with the previous two taking place ahead of the 1994 and 1999 elections. Buhlungu says the survey sought to determine the political attitudes of Cosatu members around the elections and in relation to democracy. At the same time however, the survey aimed to test two hypotheses – that there was increased dissatisfaction with the ANC’s track record in service delivery and alternative politics is beginning to emerge and secondly, whether by remaining in the alliance, Cosatu’s social movement character would be eroded. This would be reflected in increasing ruptures in opinion and values between the leadership and members and reduced levels of participation in formal union structures.

Who is a Cosatu member?

The survey reveals some interesting details on the profile of an average Cosatu member. The majority of the sample were male, aged between 26 and 45’ they are increasingly becoming more skilled with high levels of education (42% of those interviewed classified themselves as being skilled); while the majority are full-time, permanent employees. Another interesting point is that just over 50% of those interviewed joined unions after 1991.

Union democracy

As reflected in the one hypothesis, the impression has been created that union structures are not working properly, thereby affecting union democracy. The survey reveals the following:

- The overwhelming majority interviewed had elected shop

- stewards in their workplaces.
- The majority had participated in shop steward elections over the last three years.
- Shop steward elections ranged between once a year to once in three years.
- 50% of shop stewards were elected by secret ballot while the rest by show of hands.
- The majority felt that shop stewards could only do what the membership tells them to do with only 28% claiming that they could use their discretion within a broad mandate.
- The majority (64%) felt that shop stewards should consult every time he/she acted on behalf of workers while 83% felt that they should report back to workers every time and the remainder wanted reports only on important issues.
- Aside from a commitment to a participatory model of union democracy, those interviewed supported high levels of accountability from shop stewards as reflected in the fact that 94% supported the right of workers to recall a shop steward. The results showed that one out of four workers interviewed indicated that shop stewards had been recalled.
- Aside from shop steward committees, various types of structures aimed at ensuring increased participation or communication with management were found. The most prevalent structure was health and safety committees while to much lesser extent there are workplace forums (not in line with the act); green areas and formal work teams.
- Interestingly, the majority supported the promotion of shop stewards into managerial positions. This, has at times, been a problematic issue and

support or opposition to the promotion of shop stewards depends on how it is done. During discussion it became clear that if processes around promotions are transparent, then it is generally supported.

Policy making

The survey reveals relatively high levels of trust not only towards political parties but also elected political institutions. The weak link in this was however, local government structures with only 40% of the view that local government delivery was satisfactory. More than 50% trusted not only political parties to protect worker interests but also elected political institutions. This should not however, detract from fact that the vast majority (95%) felt that workers would ultimately need unions to protect their interests. In terms of importance of other institutions, the confusing messages around the existence of Nedlac were rather interesting. An estimated 68% did not know what Nedlac was while an even higher number had never been at a meeting where reports on the institution had been given. So much for promoting the benefits of social dialogue and obtaining mandates! Despite the lack of knowledge, 79% believed Nedlac was an important structure for Cosatu. Another interesting revelation was the fact that more than 60% of those interviewed did not know what Gear was, but the majority knew about the RDP.

Representative democracy

Those interviewed wanted an accountability similar to that demanded of shop stewards in the case of Cosatu leaders sent to parliament and political parties. The majority supported the

strategy of sending unionists to parliament while more than 50% agreed that non-performing 'Cosatu MPs' should be recalled. As mentioned above, the majority supported a political party that represented broader interests and not only those of workers. Those interviewed were split between support for a list and constituency system. Contrary to some views expressed during the elections by political analysts, leadership and policies appeared to be the main factors influencing workers in their choice for voting in the elections

2004 elections and the alliance

As mentioned above, the majority of those interviewed believe in the continuation of the tripartite alliance and believe it is the best way of safeguarding worker interests in parliament while the majority believe that the party they vote for will have worker interests at heart. Reflecting the fact that not all Cosatu members are members of the ANC, 18% felt the federation should not be aligned to any political party while only 8% supported a worker party. Interestingly only 4% believed worker interests in parliament should be represented by the SACP.

The ANC remained the party of choice for workers. The survey only revealed a 2% shift downwards from 75% in 1994. Other parties supported in the elections included the other six key opposition parties excluding AZAPO. An estimated 16% refused to indicate their support while 5% planned not to vote.

Reflecting the diverse political affiliations, the majority of those interviewed listed a number of existing and former ANC, Cosatu and SACP leaders as those leaders that best represent worker interests. The survey listed the top eight leaders while the

Assessment of service delivery between 1998 and 2004 revealed that the majority of workers believed there had been an improvement in the delivery of the majority of basic services.

ninth leader listed was Tony Leon.

Service delivery

The survey reveals very high levels of expectation in 1994 around the delivery of basic services and high wages. Jobs did not appear to be a factor in the build-up to the 1994 elections. Assessment of service delivery between 1998 and 2004 revealed that the majority of workers believed there had been an improvement in the delivery of the majority of basic services. The exceptions were however, jobs, wages and HIV/AIDS while there had been a 1% shift down in the assessment in the provision of clean and healthy living and working environment and 5% shift downwards in access to better health care.

If government fails to deliver, the majority (86%) felt that pressure should be put on former unionists in parliament. The second supported option was ongoing mass action to force government to deliver on promises (73%). An estimated 42% said they would vote for another political party in the next elections while 38% said workers should form an alternative party.

Conclusion

The survey results reveal organisational, political and broader societal implications not only for Cosatu but for the consolidation of democracy.

Organisationally, the survey shows that a remarkable degree of political cohesion and consensus exists within

the federation and there is a degree of continuity of organisational traditions (which might have become ritualised) despite internal and external difficulties.

At a political level, the survey points to strides being made in the consolidation of democracy. This is partly reflected in the fact that the institutions of democracy have attained a high degree of acceptability amongst Cosatu members. The findings also reveal that SA has not yet reached the point of acrimonious political fallout seen in other developing countries. While this might be the case however, the survey results do however, point to a 'new fault line brought about by economic liberalisation' which had the potential to undermine the stability which exists. This fault line refers to the question of jobs and the changing nature of the labour market which is seeing a growing informalisation of work. This fault line reveals (as reinforced in the survey results) that Cosatu's membership is predominantly in the core of the labour market (full-time work). Cosatu could either respond to this by 'retreating into an enclave as the representative of those still in employment or it could try and find common cause with those other members of the working class who are either in precarious jobs or are without jobs at all.'

18

Buhlungu is a senior researcher at Swop and a sociology lecturer. He presented the findings of the survey at a Swop seminar in April 2004.