

# Fighting poverty is in fashion

Building coalitions around unemployment and poverty is in vogue with various organs of civil society scrabbling to put their individual stamp on such initiatives. The **Labour Bulletin** explores some of these initiatives including the AIDC's 'right to work (R2W)' campaign and Cosatu's Western Cape coalition to fight unemployment and poverty.

Cosatu's Western Cape region has taken the initiative to give content to Cosatu's 'Save the Jobs' campaign, which saw workers around the country taking to the streets on 27 June. The region, through its regional secretary Tony Ehrenreich, began a process of engagement with a cross section of civil society organisations with the aim of laying the groundwork for building and strengthening a coalition to support Cosatu's jobs and poverty campaign.

In recent months, weekly meetings have been held involving NGOs such as the Alternative Information and Development Centre (AIDC), Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), Trust for Community Outreach and Education (TCOE), Workers' World, Peoples' Health Movement and various housing, education and development action groups. During these meetings it became clear that building a coalition to develop a united front against poverty and unemployment required the mobilising of grassroots organisations or community-based organisations. An anti-poverty and unemployment campaign could not evolve if it only included Cosatu and NGOs

as NGOs are not mandated by or representative of communities.

Martin Jansen of Workers' World Media Productions says that eventually it was agreed that as part of building such a campaign it was necessary to build local community organisation by targeting issues affecting communities such as housing, health and educational struggles whilst also involving the youth. Various organisations, involved in this process, agreed to bring in sectors of the community that they work with. An estimated 70 organisations representing different elements of civil society attended the launch of the coalition aimed at strengthening the jobs and poverty campaign. The organisations which attended – excluding the ANC who sent an apology – included various social movements such as the Landless People's Movement to the TAC; Fedusa and Nactu; church organisations, sports groupings and a range of NGOs. The launch on 22 August was about the process of building organisation around the campaign with the aim of beginning to mobilise local communities around issues affecting them.

## RIGHT TO WORK (R2W) CAMPAIGN

As part of a strategy apparently to bolster the Cosatu initiative, the AIDC hosted a seminar on 12 August to build a united front against unemployment and launch an R2W campaign. This campaign is 'a call to all organisations and individuals in our communities, villages and cities such as the youth, women, churches, trade unions, the unemployed, community organisations, NGOs to come together and demand:

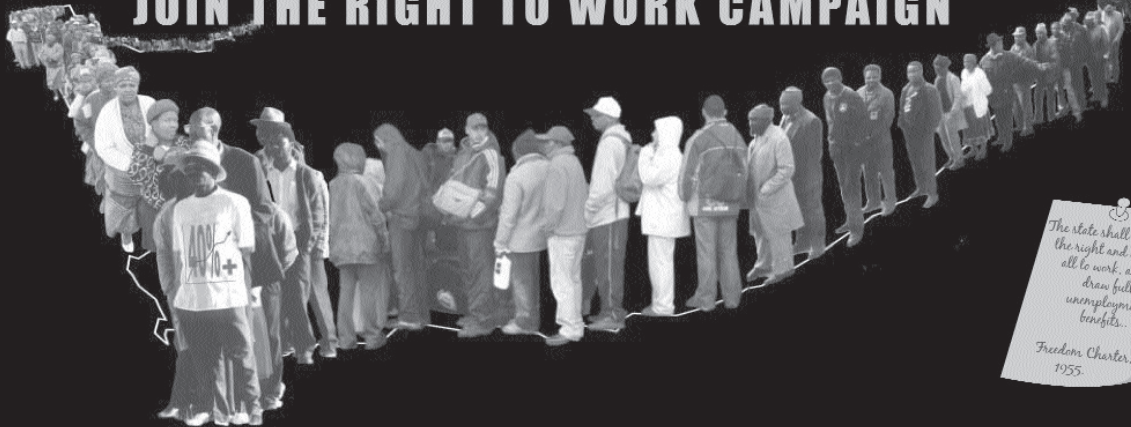
- the Right to Work as a constitutionally guaranteed right;
- a Basic Income Grant and Unemployment benefits for all;
- a halt to all retrenchments;
- permanent jobs at the minimum wage in government's Expanded Public work's Programme;
- reduction of the hours of work to 40 hours of work with no loss of pay;
- a rescue card for the unemployed – a smart card for transport and food parcels;
- proper skills training for real jobs."

The seminar sought to bring together activists, researchers/academics and trade unionists from across all federations who are doing work around unemployment and poverty so as to get a common understanding of the employment crisis and how to respond to it. AIDC director Brian Ashley stated at the outset that the seminar sought to start a process of collaboration and working together on the question of job losses, unemployment and poverty. AIDC head of education and campaigns Peter Dwyer argued that two viruses – HIV/AIDS and unemployment were eating away at the heart and soul of communities infecting the working class. The R2W campaign, he said, sought to give a voice to the unemployed.

Using the approach adopted by the TAC, the AIDC would like to encourage the setting up R2W forums on the ground that can bring together all concerned with job losses and

# make unemployment history

JOIN THE RIGHT TO WORK CAMPAIGN



*The state shall recognise  
the right and duty of  
all to work, and to  
draw full  
unemployment  
benefits...*  
Freedom Charter,  
1955.



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unemployment to:

- discuss strategies for making unemployment government's highest priority, e.g. join the marches of the unemployed, pickets outside retrenching companies, write to your MP to demand action against unemployment;
- undertake local surveys on unemployment in your community to show the authorities the real size of the problem;
- organise public meetings to highlight the problem of unemployment;
- obtain endorsements for the campaign from local churches, women, youth, labour organisations etc.;
- formulate local demands to challenge and campaign for job creation.
- establish cultural programmes as part of raising awareness about the unemployment crisis.

During discussions on the R2W campaign, a number of delegates asked where the programme would be located as a range of similar campaigns have been initiated by different organisations. Ashley says it was no accident that the majority of delegates at the seminar come from the labour movement.

Ultimately, the R2W campaign will be located within the union movement, he said. The R2W campaign, the AIDC argues, was being positioned to feed into other campaigns, such as the Cosatu initiative.

#### UNDERLYING DYNAMICS

In the build-up to Cosatu's national strike on 27 June, various civil society organisations and Cosatu held a rally at the Cape Town City Hall. During the rally various people made references to the need to bring back the spirit of the 80s in terms of organisation and mobilising. Reference was made to the days of the United Democratic Front (UDF) while Ehrenreich began to talk about the building of an unemployment/poverty coalition as a UDF-type coalition.

So, when the idea of the coalition hit the headlines, focus was given to the UDF labelling, raising questions as to whether this coalition sought to position itself in opposition to the ANC and was the start of a left party. Cosatu and the SA Communist Party were quick to reject the notion of a UDF-type formation. The federations' position was repeated during its recent central

committee meeting and formed part of a political declaration adopted, aside from the numerous comments made by Cosatu president Willie Madisha. The declaration stated: 'We reaffirmed the need for stronger and more consistent cooperation with other formations in civil society, including expanding the coalition around jobs and poverty... we reject suggestions in the media that these coalitions will re-establish the UDF in opposition to the ANC or initiate the process of creating a new party of the left...'

It has been argued that it is inevitable that people in the Western Cape will begin to liken this coalition to the UDF because of the nature of politics in the region. The formation of this coalition also has implications for how Cosatu engages with broader civil society and social movements. Will this initiative begin to reclaim the space currently being filled by various social movements? Finally, the building of a coalition around jobs and poverty should not be hijacked by differing political interests to reinforce the so-called power of any particular organisation. Such a campaign should not be the domain of any one individual or organisation.

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