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Extract from

Striking Back

by Jeremy Baskin

COSATU: challenges of the 1990s

Trade unionist JEREMY BASKIN* has written the first history of COSATU, which was published this month. *Labour Bulletin* reprints the final chapter.

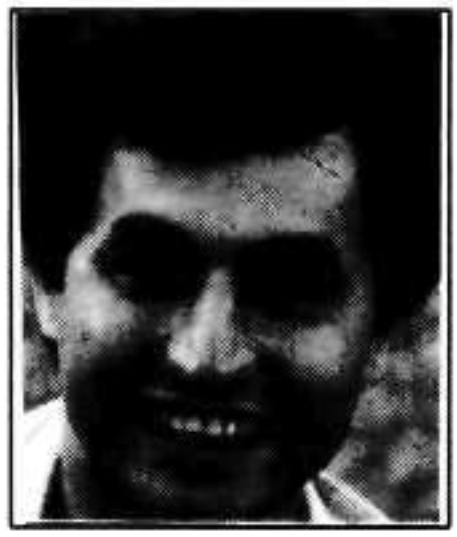
A range of new challenges - political, organisational and structural - have emerged as COSATU enters the 1990s. The federation must redefine its political role now that organisations such as the ANC have been unbanned. Organisationally it needs to determine how best to inject more vibrancy into its worker-controlled structures, how to organise the unorganised, and how to reorganise the disorganised.

* *Jeremy Baskin,* Striking Back, *(Ravan, 1991). Baskin has been involved in the union movement since the early 1970s, became general secretary of PPWAWU in the 1980s, and is currently national co-ordinator of COSATU*

The union movement must ensure that its structures are adequate to the demands of the time. Many of these challenges involve rethinking the democratic process. Is democratic centralism appropriate for a mass organisation in the current phase? Can 'delegate democracy' be balanced with elements of 'direct democracy'? Is it desirable to entrench affirmative action constitutionally? There is still the enormous task of organising the unorganised. Most COSATU affiliates have not yet organised half the potential membership in their sector. SACTWU, which represents 80% of workers in the clothing, textile and leather sector, is the glaring exception. In some sectors, such as construction, organisation has barely scratched the surface.

There are also sectors which are essentially unorganised, notably agriculture, where millions are employed. Finally, there is the task of consolidating organisation in previously-isolated areas of the country, particularly the homelands, and securing basic legal rights for these workers. One of the key organisational challenges of the 1990s concerns white collar workers and workers previously considered beyond unionisation.

Thousands in this category have flocked to join COSATU affiliates, but often find their needs are not catered for by unions whose structures, traditions and style have developed around the organisation of blue collar and semi-skilled workers. The result has been relatively ineffectual unionisation among office workers, bank employees and computer operators.



Jeremy Baskin

These jobs are no longer the preserve of white workers, and their importance is increasing with changes in the production process and the introduction of new technologies. Workers performing professional tasks - nurses, teachers, academics, technicians and others - have also demanded unionisation. Many have strong professional pride and commitment to their work - they are in a 'career' rather than a 'job'. Yet they feel they are also workers with rights to decent working conditions. The established union movement, for that is what COSATU has become, has been slow to respond. It is no solution to insist, as COSATU has sometimes done, that they join the existing industrial union for their sector. Civil servants and other state employees have also shown interest in unionisation. This sector employs increasing numbers of black people, although at present most work for separate ethnic administrations.

Organising these workers is a challenge with major political implications for a future South Africa. In the law-enforcement sector, prison warders, policemen and even black soldiers have demanded union rights. COSATU needs to develop a meaningful strategy to cope with these demands.

Mergers - phase two

Phase two of the union merger process has barely started. There is enormous potential for a broad range of established unions and staff associations to be brought into the mainstream of trade unionism. A number of these, led by conservative leaders, have affiliated to NACTU in an attempt to avoid incorporation by a COSATU affiliate.

However, many workers - particularly coloured, Indian and white workers - are still isolated and remain within their existing unions out of habit. Others are held there by the threat of losing benefits should they resign. Still others feel unable to identify with COSATU's tradition of militancy and political involvement.

It is essential that

COSATU projects itself as a home for these workers - not an easy task in practice. Many white workers openly praise COSATU affiliates and are jealous of their ability to win meaningful wage increases and ensure job security. However they are, generally speaking, deeply hostile to COSATU's political outlook.

As a result, COSATU's white worker membership can be numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands. It is no accident that right-wingers have launched whites-only unions which base their appeal on promises to be 'the white COSATU'. Whether the federation can find a formula to appeal to larger numbers of coloured, Indian, and even white workers, without sacrificing the essence of its political outlook and organisational approach, remains an open question.

Unity with NACTU unions is another aspect of the ongoing merger challenge. Much of the tension between COSATU and NACTU is political, arising from differences between the Congress/ANC tradition and those in the Africanist or BC camps. With the unbanning of political organisations, the pressures on unions to substitute for these bodies should lessen. There is no reason why, in a freer political environment, differences should not be accommodated within one democratic union federation.

The alternative is to pursue the unattractive model of certain European countries with a number of federations - socialist, communist and christian - each indirectly linked to the major political parties.

Strengthening democracy

COSATU has retained its essentially democratic nature, but in many respects internal union democracy is weaker today than ever before. There are signs that rank-and-file membership no longer participate effectively in determining macro-policy in their own unions or COSATU.

The growing movement towards centralised bargaining structures increases the risk of leadership isolation from ordinary membership. The protracted 1990 strike at Mercedes Benz - directed at NUMSA's leadership as much as at the company itself, exemplifies this. The weakening of democratic processes was one consequence of the state of emergency. Unions and youth organisations sometimes took shortcuts. There were cases where stayaway action, for example, was achieved more by stopping transport or blockading roads than actively winning support.

The growing number and complexity of issues dealt with by the unions has also weakened democratic participation. It is one matter to involve membership in a demand for recognition and higher wages, but far more difficult to maintain mass participation when negotiating the intricacies of a provident fund. The latter requires shopfloor leadership which understands the details of negotiations, can report back the salient points to the workforce, and develop a mandate over critical issues.

COSATU has often been unable to do this with its major campaigns. Mobilisation of mass support in the anti-LRA campaign has been one of the few exceptions. SACTWU's mass participation in the workers' charter campaign is another.

Increasing the mass base of COSATU campaigns is essential for the re-invigoration of union democracy. The post-February situation created the space for unions to concentrate again on democratic participation, as much as on the issues themselves. Part of the challenge involves ensuring that union structures are adequate to the tasks of representing, educating and informing membership, and meeting their needs. COSATU's campaign conferences are an attempt to do this.

Strengthening democracy also demands examination of the poor participation of women in COSATU and its affiliates. The issue at stake

is not simply increasing the number of women in leadership but also ensuring that a post-apartheid society is non-sexist as well as non-racial. For the union movement this means exploring affirmative action more seriously, for example by including constitutional provisions requiring that at least one-third of all executive committee positions are held by women.

Union and COSATU structures

The union movement has three major weaknesses in its internal organisational functioning - it lacks professionalism, has inadequate or non-existent training programmes, and its constitutional structures are not the most suitable to meeting the challenge of the 1990s. Naturally there are differences within and between affiliates. COSATU and a number of affiliates have recently started addressing these weaknesses. But to a greater or lesser extent, they apply to all affiliates and to the federation.

The lack of professionalism reveals itself in many ways. It is unusual to find a union head office where all recognition or wage agreements signed can be found easily. It is rare to find a union general secretary who can authoritatively say whether Everyman Sithole is a union member, how many shop stewards the union has, or

what proportion of its members have been granted 16 June as a paid holiday. The problem repeats itself at regional and branch levels. Information systems are inadequate or non-existent. Efficiency is rarely practised, nor is it valued.

At local level, organisers and officials are generally forced to rely on their own resources and inventiveness. Those unions which have tried to address these problems have often resorted to bureaucratic solutions, further disempowering both local officials and the general membership.

The almost total absence of staff training is also a major weakness unions must confront. Almost all union officials - organisers, educators and administrators - receive no training or induction before starting work. Many are unable to use a calculator effectively, yet are expected to negotiate complex wage agreements. On-the-job training is the most a union employee can expect and even this is likely to be little more than advice from an experienced organiser.

This sometimes releases great qualities of inventiveness and initiative. More often than not, it leads to poor administrative and organising methods and weak negotiating skills. Finally, existing constitutional structures need a fundamental rethink. Progressive South African unionism is based on British unionism, albeit a more democratic version. The South African model rests heavily on structures in every plant, worker majorities on every union committee, NECs composed of delegates from branches or regions, a strong general secretary. With the exception of the last feature, which is a more recent development, the outlines of this model were developed when the union movement revived in the 1970s. The system of majoritarian hegemony, whereby the majority position is binding on the entire union, needs careful re-examination. It has frequently been justified in much the same way as the Leninist concept of democratic centralism - that positions are debated thoroughly but decisions reached are binding on and must be propagated by all.

Some variant of this system binds all democratic organisations. Debates cannot continue endlessly and majority decision-making must be respected. In COSATU's earlier years, with extreme repression and when the federation often had to substitute for political organisations, majoritarian hegemony was necessary to ensure a high level of discipline and unity within the organisation. However the strong version of majoritarian hegemony is

inappropriate in the current phase. The problem is revealed most obviously in the prevailing system of layered democracy and bloc voting. South African unionism is based on layered, rather than direct, democracy. Workers typically elect shop stewards by general ballot at the workplace. Some of these shop stewards then sit on local or branch committees and elect branch leadership and decide branch policies. Branches in turn send delegates to the region... and so on up to national level.

In theory the system is highly democratic. In practice it is only effective if, as COSATU insists, delegates go to higher meetings with a mandate and report back to their constituency after every meeting. Experience reveals that this process is inconsistent and inadequate. While shop stewards generally have a direct relationship with the membership, leaders at higher levels do not. The danger, of course, is that national leaders may end up representing only the regional leaders that elected them and not the membership as a whole. Equally, they may represent the views of union activists rather than the general membership. To deepen the democratic process, the tried and tested system of layered democracy must be supplemented with direct consultation of the

membership on key issues. In some countries major policy decisions or the election of national leadership is done by direct balloting of union membership.

A related corollary of majoritarian hegemony is bloc voting. This emerges most strongly at COSATU's regional and national congresses. National congresses are exciting, vibrant events and delegates arrive bringing the outlook and mandates of the workers who sent them. They invariably meet beforehand as delegates from a particular region of that affiliate and attempt to develop a uniform position. At the congress itself they caucus with other delegates from their union and develop a common union position. This is presented to congress as, for example, the NUMSA position. The result is bloc voting, in practice, if not in theory.

This inability to accommodate democratic pluralism can have negative effects, as seen in the debate at COSATU's second congress on adoption of the Freedom Charter. NUMSA's Eastern Cape delegates were unable to vote in favour of the political position expressed by NUM despite having a mandate to do so from their members in the region. With bloc voting, pluralism assumes a bureaucratic form and emerges as conflict between monolithic unions rather than differing views of worker delegates. Concentric circles of majoritarian hegemony, even if they reach down to every factory and local, will eventually result in no democracy at all.

The existing system is not undemocratic. Indeed, these structures have largely proved themselves in practice: resilient in the face of attack, and with the multiplicity of layers resistant to state disruption. They have also given ordinary workers real power to decide on bread-and-butter issues affecting them in their plants. But the system has not always empowered workers in regard to the larger social and political issues COSATU has taken up.

COSATU is generally accepted to be greater than the sum of its parts, although this is not reflected in the federation's structures. These are composed entirely of delegates from the various affiliates. Although COSATU locals, and local leadership, may be crucial in promoting the federation, they have no formal representation in the higher structures, national or regional. Delegations at COSATU's biannual national congress are made up entirely of delegates from affiliates. None come from COSATU's own local or regional structures. This discourages working-class

consciousness in favour of a more sectional affiliate consciousness.

There is a real possibility that COSATU will soon be the major player in drafting a new industrial relations structure, and there is every reason to explore other models of unionism. The British model is one of the weaker systems internationally. Its unions are declining in numbers and influence, and its membership is often extremely conservative. Its public image is of a defensive, reactive and narrowly sectional union movement. Developing union structures which deepen democracy, give direct power to ordinary members, and maintain organisational vibrancy is one of the key challenges COSATU faces.

Workers and officials

A key area requiring reassessment is the relationship between 'workers' and 'officials'. A central tenet within COSATU and its affiliates is that workers control the organisation and officials are simply full-time functionaries. Unlike most union movements internationally, all elected leadership positions are held by union members who continue to retain their ordinary jobs. The intention *is to maintain ongoing links* between leadership and ordinary union members.

The only exception to this system is the position of union secretary which is generally held by a full-time

official. As we have seen, acknowledgment that this position is a powerful one developed during the COSATU era - and has also coincided with the almost total disappearance of women from the position of union secretary. In practice, however, worker leaders have found great difficulty combining a full day's work with the demanding tasks of union leadership. Some have managed to negotiate time off from their workplaces, while others have the status of full-time shop stewards, essentially free to come and go as they please. This solution gives a union president, for example, an opportunity to tackle union duties while retaining links with the shopfloor. However, it is not a solution for most union members, tending to restrict leadership positions to those working in large, well-organised plants where they are able to negotiate extensive time off.

The problem becomes worse as the tasks of leadership become more demanding and complex. Major union issues cannot be adequately tackled and *grasped on a part-time basis.* As a result, it is usually union officials who wield real power, with elected worker leaders and executive committees acting as a check on the abuse of that power.

The union general secretary is more likely to be better known, and called upon to resolve a crisis within the union, than the president. Since the principle of worker leadership was originally intended to ensure hands-on leadership by workers, the system clearly no longer works effectively. While the principle is retained, officials wield more power than ever before, and effective worker leaders no longer spend much time at work. The challenge to COSATU involves retaining 'worker leadership', making it more meaningful, yet avoiding its pitfalls where, for example, a worker is elected union president and then effectively retains that position for life. The solution to the worker/official dilemma may require changes to the country's labour law to facilitate time-off and job security for elected worker leaders, enabling them to return to the factory on expiry of their term of office.

The political challenge

The political context has changed greatly, both internationally and locally. International attitudes towards the apartheid regime are softening, and the global balance of power has shifted *with the collapse of* communist Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War.

These changes have major implications for any socialist vision, and the possibilities for its realisation, which

COSATU may have. They also highlight the dangers of sacrificing union independence whereby unions become mere 'transmission belts' through which party interests are conveyed to workers.

Here, the country's future hangs in the balance with numerous forces battling to determine and influence the shape of a new South Africa. Since 2 February 1990, the ANC and De Klerk have stood at centre stage. De Klerk and his government are preparing to share, and perhaps even transfer, political power, while keeping white social and economic privilege secure. Enormous opportunities for organisation have opened up for the ANC, PAC and others. Racism, despite scrapped apartheid legislation, remains at the core of the system. Opposition forces, including COSATU, still face the task of transforming the country into one where the needs and aspirations of the majority of working people are respected.

COSATU's political role has been called into question since the unbanning of the ANC and SACP. Why, some have asked, should COSATU remain politically active? This view fails to understand the relationship between the trade union movement and politics. COSATU did not become politically active simply because the ANC was banned. Its outlook came from an understanding, which

pre-dated the federation's formation, that the union movement could not achieve its union goals without fundamental social and political changes. The unions found politics on the factory floor. How could they call for improved training and job advance- ment opportunities without challenging racism, job reservation and unequal education? How could they challenge the LRA without confronting the undemocratic process by which it had been drafted and passed into law? How could they call for a living wage without challenging the profits of major companies and the distribution of wealth within South African society? These questions remain valid despite the ANC's unbanning and the as yet unrealised prospects of democracy.

Organised industry and commerce has never avoided political involvement. Indeed, the racial structures of South African society are in large measure a product and expression of employer interests. Mine-owners and industrialists have had privileged access to governments of the day. Their political involvement has hence been less public, less oppositional and less confrontational than that of the union movement, but no less real.

A democratic system does not restrict politics to political parties. It is a peculiarly South African concept, propagated over the years by the National Party, that politics is something which belongs in parliament. Politics affects the entire social fabric. The union movement, like all major social institutions, has political interests. Economic policies affect its membership. So too do the structures and constitution of society. The right to freedom of speech or assembly; whether international trade barriers are restrictive or open; whether a new constitution is drafted by a constituent assembly or behind closed doors; the structure of the industrial relations system; whether the health-care system is centred on public or private medicine: these are all political issues which impact on the union movement, its members, and the working class more generally.

The post-February political situation is not, therefore, an argument against COSATU's continuing political involvement. However, it does mean the nature of the federation's political role must be reconsidered.

Many joined or became active in COSATU because it offered one of the few means for legal political expression. ANC and SACP underground activists were specifically assigned to the task of building a strong trade

union movement. In the repressive climate, COSATU became an outlet for the political hopes of far more than its membership. It acted as a political centre. Youths and students looked to it for guidance; churches asked it for political direction; ambassadors, foreign visitors and political journalists canvassed its opinions - and not because of any particular interest in or support for trade unionism.

To a large extent COSATU spoke for the entire democratic movement. It was seen as the voice of the ANC in a situation where the ANC could not openly speak.

The key difference in the post-apartheid period is that COSATU no longer has to engage in political substitutionism. It no longer has to attempt to speak for the entire democratic movement. The ANC, SACP, PAC and others can now openly speak for themselves. COSATU's direct role is not on the political terrain of parliament, elections and lawmaking, although its policies will continue to have major effects on these. For the federation this will probably mean a shift in emphasis from 'Politics' to 'politics', with its political role in the 1990s one of process and direction. It is likely to act as a watchdog on the political dimensions of the state's social and economic policies. In the short term this will cause a crisis within COSATU, for its leadership is accustomed to a high-profile political role.

While it is COSATU's right and duty to call for a constituent assembly as the most democratic means of drafting a new constitution, its role is not to stand for election to that assembly. In the interim, however, COSATU is still likely to play a direct political role - partly because of its mobilising ability and partly because the present period is one in which the foundations are being laid for the country's social and political system for decades to come.

A key element of COSATU's political activities will undoubtedly be to ensure that the voice of organised labour is heard when the policies of a post-apartheid South Africa are drafted. COSATU has already begun, and will undoubtedly continue, to draft policies on issues such as housing, medical care, social security, and training. It is also considering economic policy in some detail - particularly the relationship between the state and the private sector, between market and non-market forces, and the role of the union movement in restructuring the economy.

The post-February situation not only challenges COSATU on the question of political substitutionism. It compels the federation to consider its attitude to the structures of society in a non-racial democratic South Africa. It will no longer be sufficient for the trade unions to be a force of opposition and resistance. They will have to be a force for reconstruction and change.

A new industrial relations system

A major task facing the federation is the active reshaping of the country's industrial relations system. Many sectors still have no agreed national bargaining forums. There is no forum for organised industry and organised labour as a whole to negotiate issues of national importance such as public holidays, economic restructuring, basic employment conditions and a national provident fund. These gaps are destructive and perpetuate conflict. However, talks with Saccola over the LRA problem may have provided a foundation for such a national forum, and a restructured NMC may also offer possibilities.

A major part of any new system will involve drafting an entirely new labour law. Apart from the need to extend union rights to all workers, a new law must include dispute resolution and arbitration procedures which are both faster and more fair than at present. It must also establish basic bargaining structures and reinforce principles such as worker control of the union

Worker meeting: built as a resistance movement, COSATU faces complex new challenges

Photo: FAWU

movement.

The present industrial relations system grudgingly acknowledges the union movement. A new system must accept unions as a necessary social institution. This demands that both employers and unions accept a new set of 'rules', including an end to the culture of violence which has become a hallmark of industrial relations since the 1986 state of emergency, and the establishment of basic rights and powers in the workplace.

In presenting its perspectives on post-apartheid South Africa the union movement needs to be aware of the dangers of sectionalism. As the voice of organised labour, unions have an inherent tendency to be sectional. Already unions face allegations of representing only a labour aristocracy - privileged workers employed by the larger corporations, or urban, rather than rural, workers. Two aspects of sectionalism require particular vigilance, namely disputes involving members of the public and a tendency to represent the views of relatively better-off workers.

In the health sector strikes of 1990 a potential conflict of interest emerged between workers and the broader public. On the one hand health workers were striking for the right to join unions and earn a decent wage. On the other hand members of the public were concerned about their health and the virtual collapse of medical services for the duration of the strike. In situations like this the union movement will have to spend more time and energy justifying its actions to general public, black and white. This in turn implies greater responsibility, more openness, improved publicity, and a conscious attempt to win public support during industrial action. This principally affects unions in the service sector, where workers deal directly the general public, although it may also be relevant during protracted disputes in the manufacturing sector.

South Africa's economy already contains a dangerous dualism, with large, technologically sophisticated enterprises operating alongside sweatshops and informal sector production. It is easier for the union movement to organise, mobilise and represent workers employed by major corporations. However, unless COSATU can show that it is interested as much

in employment creation as a living wage, as much in public health-care as medical aid schemes for its members, its influence will decline in society. The views the federation propagates at the political and economic level must be successfully presented as the interests of the vast majority of people.

The union movement is used to being labelled a disruptive force, and blamed for inflation, unemployment and a variety of other ills. Union leaders are accustomed to being called 'communists', 'terrorists' and 'agitators'. In the past, unions have dismissed these charges, secure in the belief that they represented the interests of the great majority of the population.

The unions can expect to be accused of disruption even in the post-apartheid era. The charges will be packaged differently: there will be less talk of 'communists' and more of 'sabotaging national reconstruction'. The unions will have to take these allegations seriously, especially since they will come from a popularly-elected government. COSATU is attempting to face this challenge by developing a comprehensive programme for union involvement in social and economic reconstruction.

Pluralism

Combatting dogmatism and intolerance within its own ranks is another difficult task

facing COSATU. In part this problem has arisen because of political substitutionism, where COSATU was seen, and saw itself, as a flag-bearer of the banned ANC. Most unions attempted to adhere to a clearly defined line, maintaining political clarity and coherence during a period of harsh state attack. But when there were no clear majorities to determine that line, as in the case of the CCAWUSA split or during COSATU's second congress, the results were deeply divisive. Unions acting as bearers of one political position is unsustainable in the current period. They are essentially mass organisations which accept all workers as members, regardless of political affiliation.

All key political organisations now accept, at least in theory, the need for political pluralism in a post-apartheid South Africa. This involves the right of a variety of political parties to exist, contest elections, and compete for support for their political perspectives within all major social institutions - including the trade union movement. When this becomes a reality it will be hard to justify linking the fortunes of the trade union movement too closely with one political line - as happened not only in the Soviet Union but with many of the social-democratic parties of Western Europe.

Two alternatives can accommodate this situation. The first envisages separate federations linked to different political parties or movements. These could co-operate on industrial issues as required. In practice the situation would not be vastly different to continuing with COSATU, NACTU and UWUSA, allied to the ANC, PAC and Inkatha respectively.

The other option is to have one federation for all workers, and one union in each sector. This would require a high level of tolerance for differing political views expressed within its ranks, with majority and minority factions competing for support from the membership as a whole.

COSATU's founding slogan of 'One Country, One Federation' impels it towards the second option, although this has implications for the existing tripartite alliance between COSATU, the ANC and SACP. How the process unfolds will depend on the policies of a post-apartheid government and on the union movement's decisions about its political role in a democratic society.

In its brief five years, COSATU has shown itself capable of reaching great heights. How the federation resolves the challenges outlined above will have long-term implications for the future of the union movement and the country as a whole. ☆