

CUSA - a look at its past

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Introduction

More than 400 people from all over South Africa met in Johannesburg three years ago to form a new federation of trade unions. Today that federation is one of the country's giants in the labour field with more than 100,000 members.

This article attempts to put into historical perspective the reason why that federation - today known as the Council of Unions of South Africa (Cusa) - was formed.

Historical Background

The Consultative Committee of Black unions was formed in 1973. The following unions were involved:

- Engineering and Allied Workers' Union;
- National Union of Clothing Workers;
- Laundry, Dry Cleaning and Dyeing Workers' Union;
- South African Chemical Workers' Union;
- Textile Workers' Union (Tvl);
- Transport and Allied Workers' Union;
- Tobacco Workers' Union;
- Union of Bank Employees.

It should be noted that the purpose of the Committee was for consultation on worker problems which affected the members of these unions.

No constitution existed binding these unions as a body, and because of this, the activities of the Consultative were not effectively carried out by the members. The unions became aware of this position.

Furthermore, the Consultative was geared to maintain its black identity and to meet any workers' organisation or federation on an equal basis to avoid domination by other race groups.

An Attempt To Form a National Body of Black Trade Unions

In March 1977, after a mutual agreement between TUACC (Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council), the National Union of Motor Assembly Workers and the Consultative Committee, a meeting was called. *The National Union of Clothing Workers and the Textile Union (Tvl)* were represented at this meeting. The Western Cape Province Advice Bureau declined to attend.

The purpose of the meeting was to explore the possibilities of forming a

federation. Although the Consultative was in favour of such a motion, it nevertheless had a number of reservations which were tabled at the meeting as resolutions -

- that strong unions were needed in order to have a strong federation.
- that the TUACC unions (then based in Durban) should stop forming duplicate unions in Johannesburg and around the Reef.
- that organisations like the Urban Training Project, the Industrial Aid Society and the Institute of Industrial Education, being service organisations, should not be part of the federation.
- that the Consultative Committee strongly objected to the manner in which the advancement of black leadership was being stifled.

Assurance was then given by the TUACC unions that they would try to abide by the resolutions, and that meanwhile the Consultative Committee, TUACC and the National Union of Motor Assembly Workers should agree to the establishment of a Feasibility Committee. Since the National Union of Clothing Workers and the Textile Union were already affiliated to TUCSA, they did not participate in this committee.

A few months later it became apparent that TUACC had deliberately broken the Consultative Committee's resolutions because it established on the Reef the -

- i. Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU),
- ii. Chemical Industrial Union.

(These unions eventually formed the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) in 1979.)

It was for these reasons that in 1978 the Consultative Committee decided to withdraw from the Feasibility Committee. The Committee had agreed that it would look into the differences and create a concrete platform where unions would work harmoniously together.

Formation of Council of Unions of South Africa

In September and October 1979, meetings were held to explore ways in which the Consultative could be strengthened. An Ad-hoc Committee was formed. Three members each from the following unions were the representative.

1. Building and Construction Workers' Union;
2. Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union;
3. Engineering and Allied Workers' Union (which became Steel, Engineering and Allied Workers' Union);
4. Laundry, Dry Cleaning and Dyeing Workers' Union;
5. Food, Beverage Workers' Union;
6. South African Chemical Workers' Union;
7. Transport and Allied Workers' Union;
8. United African Motor Workers' Union.

A new name, SABLATU, (South African and Allied Black Trade Unions) was mentioned as a possible substitute.

It is now history that the Council of Unions of South Africa was launched on the 14th September 1980.

The reason why Cusa unions did not find a home in TUCSA or Fosatu is stated in the preamble of our constitution.

It believes:

- that the establishment of a non-racial, non-exploitative democratic society depends on the development of blacks in leadership;
 - in meeting the aspirations of all workers;
 - in the workers uniting and developing themselves to control their own destiny;
 - in the development of a strong and responsible working force which is vital for the future of South Africa; and
 - in working together with individuals and organisations who support the principle of equal opportunities for all workers in South Africa.
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