

COSATU and independent working class politics

1. Introduction

It is generally argued that the formation of COSATU has placed the social, economic and political interests of the working class firmly on the agenda of opposition politics in South Africa. Indeed, it is true that the independent trade union movement has been pivotal in developing and nurturing an embryonic socialist position. A recent writer has noted that "the socialism of the unions remains embryonic...it is present in the public pronouncements of leading trade unionists...it is present in the fierce assertion of independence and in the strong emphasis on workers control and it is most evident in the mode of organising of the major unions with the powerful emphasis on workers control". (1)

However, it is agreed that the embryonic socialism of the unions is not sufficient. What is necessary, it is argued, is that the struggle for socialism should unite the various disparate classes and groups of the oppressed and exploited in racial capitalist South Africa under the leadership of the working class. (2) But how this is to be done is not always clear. Also, there seems to be no clarity on what independence of the working class means. These issues are not fully exhausted - though a promising sign is that they are beginning to be addressed. This article is a contribution - incomplete as it may be - to that process.

It is argued in this paper that the notion of the independence of the working class is interpreted in different ways within COSATU. This difference in interpretation reflects COSATU's historical inheritance. It is further suggested that a common and fully developed understanding of working class independence can most readily inform working class militants as to the best possible method of enhancing working class hegemony and control over society. But first, it is necessary to briefly deal with how this notion of working class independence came to emerge.

2. An attempted history (3)

The independent working class position, no doubt, has its origins in certain sections of the emergent trade union movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Unions such as those affiliated to

FOSATU argued for first establishing a strong factory floor presence before embarking on overtly political issues which would lead to direct confrontation with the state. (4) The arena of "state politics" (5) was not actively contested. Rather it was postponed to an indefinite future. This strategy it should be noted, was informed by primarily two factors:

- (i) the harsh political and economic climate which then prevailed. The intransigent attitudes of the bosses and the state provided formidable stumbling blocks to the few emerging trade unions; and
- (ii) this "survivalist ethic" was coupled with a conception that it was SACTU's association with "populist politics" which finally led to its demise in the early 1960's.

Against this background then, the FOSATU unions distanced themselves from the sphere of state politics. This strategy evoked strong criticism from unions that identified closely with the dominant nationalist political tradition, ie. SAAWU, GAWU etc. The early FOSATU position engendered a narrow economic outlook and inspired the emergence of a "syndicalist" position. Independence of the working class (implicitly defined as meaning only organised workers in the factories) came to mean organisational independence not only from the state, but also from politics altogether.

The formation of the UDF on August 20 1983 once again raised the issue of the relationship between the popular movement and the working class movement best represented by the trade unions. Most major nationally organised industrial unions refused to affiliate to the UDF on the grounds that they wished to maintain their organisational independence. (6) What they would do, was to encourage their respective members to support campaigns and efforts initiated by popular organisations. Their non-affiliation stance was based on the following:

- (i) the multi-class nature of these organisations which would preclude workers being in the driving seat of campaigns - for historically in South Africa, there has been a tendency for the professional elements of the national liberation movement to dominate leadership positions;
- (ii) the different methods of operation and organisation between the two where the emphasis on rank and file participation, mandates, report-backs and accountability of leadership, is severely lacking in popular organisations;
- (iii) the fact that many of their members subscribed to different political ideologies and an identification with a specific

one would incur the risk of splitting the unions.

In addition to the above telling points, the politics of the popular struggle, with its predominant emphasis on securing the vote as a form of democracy was characterised - incorrectly - as petit bourgeois. Incorrectly, I argue because the struggle for the vote as a form of democracy has no inherent fixed class position. As a form of democracy, the franchise does not necessarily represent the interests of the black petit-bourgeoisie or any other class in society for that matter. (7)

Secondly, these unions (and here I am referring to unions which were then affiliated to the now defunct FOSATU as well as GWU, ECWU, CCAWUSA and CTMWA) felt that there was little to suggest that the petit-bourgeois leaders of the popular movement would seek to transform the politics of the dominated black majority by rooting it firmly within the black working class. These two points were important factors in the decision of these unions to attempt to steer away from "state-politics". However, through a process of self-criticism, criticism from unions which indentified closely with the dominant nationalist tradition, pressure from their rank and file and the wider political climate which thrust itself upon these unions, we saw certain FOSATU unions taking on more overtly political issues. (8)

To sum up then, the notion of working class independence could roughly be characterised as follows:

- (i) a recognition of the fact that the working class has social, economic and political interests that necessitate its organisation as a separate class;
- (ii) the methods and ways the working class in progressive trade unions organises is distinctively different from popular organisations such as the UDF - with regard to mandating, report-backs, accountability etc., and
- (iii) implicit in the notion of working class independence was the recognition that workers identify with different political ideologies. But despite these differences workers strive to act and continue to attempt to act in a unified manner in struggling against capital and the state. This obviously requires open and free debate and discussion within the organised (and broader?) sections of the working class.

These issues raise crucial political questions about the nature of democracy in a post-apartheid South Africa. In particular, will

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our democracy be solely a one-party democracy or will it be a plural democratic state?

These then were the crucial components that defined working class independence. However, this notion was still relatively under-developed politically as a strategy. In particular, the question remained as to what is the relationship between working class independence and political issues - how does the working class ensure its independence whilst taking on the state and its allies?

3. The birth of COSATU

It was at this time that COSATU was born. COSATU, as is well known, represents a synthesis between two traditions - the more class-based approach of the old FOSATU unions and those unions which identify closely with the nationalist political tradition. It is then not surprising that the notion of the independence of the working class is understood and interpreted differently.

There is support within COSATU for an interpretation of working class independence as meaning non-affiliation to the present political groupings. This indeed is a strong identifying characteristic of "working class independence" as outlined above. But independence of the working class does not mean non-affiliation per se. It also means that workers need to be organised as a separate class and that they, more than any other group in society, have an objective interest in the overthrow of capitalism. To this end then the socialist content of working class demands needs to be generalised throughout society. Working class independence also implies that the way in which workers organise in the progressive trade unions is radically different from the organising methods of the popular organisations: most importantly the emphasis on democratic structures and practices, and on rank and file initiative and workers control. All these traditions are present within COSATU but have not as yet gained the ideological and practical expression necessary to entrench and solidify the concept of working class independence.

COSATU correctly argues against both (i) workerism, and (ii) subsuming itself in the gulf of populism with its ill-defined freedom and lack of scientific analysis. COSATU correctly realises the need for it to play a more politically active role. But how this is to be done is still not clearly spelt out. In fact there exists an ambivalent tension within COSATU that is the subject of much debate.

On the one hand COSATU's politically active role in the arena of state politics is based on an analysis of South African society that facilitates the emergence of "political unionism". We are being told that unions in South Africa, quite rightly so, have a political role. "Non-political unionism is undesirable", says Jay Naidoo. (9) Despite this recognition that political unionism has its foundations in the very nature of South African society, there still exists the wide-spread interpretation that the unions' political role is merely to supplement the existing political battles being fought by existing political organisations. Their political role is restricted to the confines of the national democratic struggle. It is usually argued that unions simply cannot engage in the wide variety of activity that is necessary to successfully challenge the state and create a society in which workers have control. This statement, I argue, implies limiting the potential political role of the unions. The unions' political responsibilities according to this school, are merely to reinforce and reiterate present political demands voiced by the political organisations. The unions' task is not to deepen and transform the nature of these demands and trade union participation in state issues merely represents the workers' arm of the broad opposition to apartheid.

On the other hand, another view exists within COSATU: that the reiterating of national popular political demands by workers and their organisations will not automatically ensure a worker controlled society. This viewpoint argues that not only is it necessary to identify and align with national political demands, but it is also essential that these national political demands be deepened and transformed in such a way that they challenge capitalism at its very foundations. The ambiguities and silences of national political demands to be found in the Freedom Charter should be recognised. It is necessary for the trade unions to formulate their own goals and aims which would enhance the realisation of a worker controlled society. COSATU has already started this process by committing its organised membership to workers control. Presumably this means that COSATU demands the right to govern the country alongside other representative political organisations. Presumably it means that nationalised industries would be democratically controlled by the workers, their unions or any other democratic organisations of the workers which would be involved in the running of the economy. All the above obviously means negating the viewpoint that the political arena can best be left to the existing political organisations. Instead unions should not be afraid to address political issues directly. In doing this they should un-

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equivocally state how they see the future worker controlled society and the structures and institutional forms central to this. The aims and objectives formulated by the trade unions need not necessarily stand in opposition to the Freedom Charter. What this merely does, is to deepen the conceptualisation and understanding of democracy and working class struggle by putting forward worker own demands. It is only in this way that workers will see that the Freedom Charter will not liberate them entirely.

4. Alliances

This brings us to the most crucial question of all. What should the relationship be between an independent working class position and other anti-apartheid forces? How does COSATU attempt to deal with this issue? Here again there exists an ambivalence which needs to be teased out. The position that is presently vociferously and publicly asserted in COSATU, is the one of "disciplined alliances". This position correctly realises that the form of South Africa's capitalism provides the objective basis for alliances. Not only is the black working class nationally oppressed and grossly exploited but the black petit-bourgeoisie and the small black capitalist class also suffers national oppression. It recognises the need to build the widest possible form of unity amongst the oppressed and exploited in order to isolate the government. Hence, COSATU says it will form alliances with organisations who have the interests of the workers at heart and whose organisational practices further the interests of the working class. (10)

This obviously provides a strong guideline. But it is in need of further clarification. Up until now, what has emerged is a rather uncritical policy of alliances. Entering into alliances does not mean uncritical joint action with other groups or political organisations. It does not mean that students and the broader members of the public should sit in on each and every meeting of the workers irrespective of the nature thereof. It does not mean that whatever action taken by other oppressed groupings and organisations must be supported by the organised working class without actually looking at the issues critically and questioning whether such activities will exhaust our energies and resources rather than those of the state. It is indeed true that the working class must forge alliances, but what is necessary is for those alliances to be pursued in terms of the goals and interests of the organised working class. Here, it is instructive to note that the initial 3 day national stayaway call by the NECC and the UDF to commemorate

June 16 was changed to a 1 day stayaway at the instigation of COSATU.

Entering into alliances also means that working class militants should have as their priority the development and establishment of working class organisation both inside and outside of the factory. For, it is only through workers developing strong organisations of their own that their leading role can be asserted and fought for.

Alliance politics, as presently understood and practised, has meant worker organisations simply reiterating and supporting demands formulated by political organisations and not transcending them. Hence, COSATU stops at the demand for one-person-one-vote in a unitary democratic South Africa. Although the dangers of formal democracy are sometimes referred to, precisely what these dangers are is not spelt out. In order to avoid these dangers, the issue of formal democracy needs to be systematically teased out and criticised. For example, in the demand for one person one vote a conspicuous absence is the principle of accountability and recall of leadership. Simply put, is the vote once every 2nd, 3rd, 4th or 5th year enough, or do we need to have structures whereby we can exercise accountability of leadership and be in a position to remove leaders if they do not fulfil their tasks? The western advanced capitalist democracies with their elections once every 4-5 years, the non-existence of accountability and recall is the precise opposite of what our demands mean. Thus, COSATU in pursuing alliances with other groups must now state the institutional forms and organs that would give meaning to the notion of worker control over society.

COSATU's policy of "disciplined alliances" has meant in practice, thus far, only alliances with organisations sympathetic to the dominant national political tradition, ie. the UDF and its affiliates. Why is it that alliances are not extended to other organisations and political groupings. We need more debate as to how COSATU reconciles its commitment to a united working class movement, but in practice, engages with only one political grouping - dominant as it may be. Surely within COSATU and its affiliates, there exists alongside UDF supporters also members who pledge their allegiance to AZAPO, NEUM, and even Inkatha for that matter. With such a divided working class in South Africa (due to various historical reasons) it is surely an immensely difficult process to build a united working class movement. Difficult as it may be, we will not be addressing this problem if we behave and act as if it

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does not exist. What we need is open and honest debate on whom to work with and why.

5. Conclusion

It is historically true that nowhere in countries where social change has occurred, has one social class played the sole role. In all societies where changes occurred - eg. in Russia, Chile, Bolivia etc. (even if the latter two were not successful, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper) - workers formed alliances with the peasantry and the middle-classes. But what is often overlooked is that these workers through their own organisations formed alliances with an explicitly socialist ideology, sentiments and programme. But in South Africa we see the call for alliances and unity on a national democratic platform. Why is it that the demand for a Workers Charter is viewed as divisive? It is really strange that the women and students - correctly so - can have their own respective charters, but when one talks of a Workers Charter it is deemed to be divisive. But how then is the struggle for workers control to be secured in the absence of a socialist programme? How are workers to lead the struggle without a clear political programme of aims and demands? The need for debate, discussion of socialism and construction of a Workers Charter is a very urgent task indeed.

Footnotes:

- 1 D Lewis, "Capital, trade unions and the liberation struggle", SALB 11.4, 1986, p36
- 2 D Lewis, "Recession and the working class", SALB 11.5, 1986
- 3 This section on the attempted history does not deal with a central feature of the early trade union movement - which was its emphasis on being independent from the state. This obviously is an issue that will be of crucial concern for the trade union movement in a post-apartheid South Africa.
- 4 See Joe Foster, General Secretary of FOSATU, keynote speech in SALB 7.8, July 1982
- 5 Following Burawoy (1985, p11) a distinction is made between "state politics" and "production politics". The latter means that the production process itself is political and involves a set of political relations. "State politics" refers to the fact that the state remains the decisive nucleus of power in capitalist societies in that it guarantees the constellation of power outside the state, in the family, the factory and the community.

See M Burawoy, The politics of production, Verso-NLB, 1985, especially the "Introduction" for a more extended discussion on this point.

- 6 The best summary of this argument is to be found in the GWU's position on the UDF. See "GWU on the UDF", SALB 9.2, Nov, 1983
- 7 The demand for full franchise/vote does not necessarily represent a bourgeois or liberal demand. The securing of the vote is an important victory for all classes in South Africa, including the black working class for whom it would open up new and important ground. The vote, as a form of formal parliamentary democracy reflects no necessary class content. But, it is precisely because of this, that the vote as a form of parliamentary democracy is not only a potential gain for the working class, but also a potential problem. In this connection see S Gelb, "Some sociological perspectives on race, class and democracy in South Africa", ASSA conference 1984, p11
- 8 The best known example of this is FOSATU's 1984 campaign against the tricameral parliamentary elections
- 9 J Naidoo, "The significance of COSATU", SALB 11.5, 1986
- 10 COSATU resolutions 1986, p2

(Keith Browne, November 1987)

Comrade Mutandare of the ZCTU

Below we publish an interview with Comrade Mutandare, President of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, conducted on July 8 1986.

SALB: Mr Mutandare, can you tell us about your own personal history and how you came to be involved in the labour movement?

Mr Mutandare: I used to work for Anglo American in Bindura for 13 years, on the mines there. I became involved in the union because of the very poor working conditions prevailing at the time. There were wildcat strikes, and in the normal course of events management would call in the police and army, arrest the ringleaders, imprison us... We saw our salvation in the unions - at that time it was a white-led union. It was a very, very difficult time for us - we were labelled as communists, and terrorists; our mine was on the