

# Harassment of Cosatu

The past few weeks have seen unprecedented attack against the workers' movement, particularly COSATU. This has been evident in the sieges on COSATU House, headquarters of many of the Federation's affiliate unions. The first rally to launch the COSATU "Living Wage Campaign" was banned. Basically the Campaign was to include both organised workers and workers active at all other levels of the struggle, i.e. the unemployed, the youth, workers active in civics. The detention of shop stewards and union officials was coupled with right-wing violence which saw the bombing of COSATU house in Johannesburg. In Kroonstadt COSATU offices were closed down, in Vereeniging the state attempted to close down SARHWU offices by implementing the Group Areas Act.

Detention of shop stewards and union officials, and finally the rightwing violence all over the country also featured in the harassment. COSATU House was bombed. Offices in East London were burnt down. In Kroonstadt COSATU offices were closed down, while in Vereeniging the state attempted to close down SARHWU offices by implementing the Group Areas Act.

At the same time the state and COSATU have been involved in a vicious media war campaign, making accusations and counter accusations in the commercial press, or in the case of the state through the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The harassment of COSATU somehow became linked via the press to the SATS dispute. COSATU launched the "Hands off COSATU" Campaign as a response to the attack.

"Through the hands off COSATU campaign we want to make each and every member aware of the measures against COSATU. We are calling on every member to strengthen our structures at every level. Every organised factory must be represented at the locals and be part of the campaigns taken up in that local. Every union must play a role in our Regional structures, there must be extensive discussion on how to defend our organisation... Ironically these attacks are having a tremendous politicising effect on our members, workers and shopstewards are seeing that unity in action is not just something academic but has become a matter of life and death for our organisations, for our campaigns around poverty, degradation and

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low wages. There is an urgency now which is forcing everyone to rally together, in that sense our campaign is quite broad as attacks are directed at the entire democratic movement. There are other aspects to the Campaign which involves countering the propaganda and lies put out to discredit us, and asserting our right to hold meetings, to put out media, and express our views and opinions freely.<sup>2</sup>

### What saved COSATU so far

As Jay Naidoo, the Secretary General of COSATU pointed out "COSATU is not a building". Most COSATU affiliates are built on factory structures, i.e. factory shop steward committees elected by the rank and file members. This form of organisation based in factories has enabled most affiliates to withstand the challenge against them during the period of harassment. A unionist pointed out that "breakdown of communication had a positive effect on factory structures. Workers began to build the structures themselves."<sup>3</sup>

The devastating effect the bombing of COSATU House had was the dismantling of an administrative network established by unions after a long struggle and setbacks. In the words of COSATU, "the disruption caused by the bombing still applies today. There are unions today which are struggling to survive in small offices, which do not have access to telephones, which have no documentation or equipment. Directly after the bombing many affiliates had to cancel meetings with management involving negotiations over one thing or another."

At present most affiliates are unable to hold meetings at their offices with rank and file members including shop steward councils. In each case alternative venues have to be found. The reluctance by landlords to offer new offices had contributed to this problem. During this period militant SATS strikers used any space available in Johannesburg to hold their meetings.

"After the COSATU bombing strikers scattered all over Johannesburg. Most public parks in the area were used for the purpose of holding meetings, giving report backs and getting new mandates. This practice continued until we used Lekton House, the headquarters of NACTU unions."<sup>4</sup>

The problems of space affected almost all unions. The National

Union of Mineworkers was initially forced to use the Victoria Hotel in Johannesburg before getting new offices. Some unions were forced into hiding, breaking contact with their members as they got refuge from sympathetic organisations who had to hide from their respective landlords the presence of Cosatu affiliates in the building.

"COSATU has tried to get new accommodation for us but in vain,. We initially moved to a "host" organisation. We mainly used their offices and telephones. This was to contact shop stewards and management, etc. The problem we had during this period was that we were unable to inform our members; they were not supposed to know where we were as their presence (in most cases workers came in groups of five or ten or even more) in the building especially in the "host" organisation offices was going to attract the landlord who would question this."

COSATU explained the problem of new accommodation as follows:

"For us it has been quite a rough time. Whenever we approached owners of buildings wanting to lease premises we have generally received a negative response. The government has also been threatenig a Group Areas clampdown making life insecure for many of affiliates even now. Basically it has meant unions have been inconvenienced for a long time, that we have had to lease more expensive premises. It has meant many unions operating from a single open office."

Operating from small offices poses problems with regard to consolidating factory structures. The absence of shop steward council meetings, shop stewards with their rank and file membership during weekends and even after work is detrimental to building strong and educated membership. A unionist expressed this view angrily by stating that "As a democratic union, meetings with members are important for us. We can't do this at factories given the time limits set by management, and hence our union premises are important. "

A shop steward also said "In the building - Tudor Mansions - we used to have meetings with workers but the landlord has recently given us notice to vacate the offices at 7.00 p.m. This has disrupted our meetings, it has meant that we can no longer come and discuss developments at the factories amongst ourselves as shop stewards from different factories and with our union officials."<sup>6</sup>

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A more worrying aspect of the harassment of COSATU in the longer term is the rise of more subtle and covert right wing attacks, most notably in the form of petrol bombings of shop-stewards and workers homes, the vigilante attacks, killings of members and so on. "This involves a long term response to repression. These right-wing attacks in the interim are designed to have a debilitating effect on us. Through the 'Hands Off Campaign' we hope to address some of these issues." 7

Most affiliate and COSATU plans for 1987 as a whole were affected. COSATU states the extent to which it was affected as follows, "It has made a big impact on us. Whereas up to that point we had been concentrating on offensive campaigns, the living wage campaign, mergers, building action around June 16, the moves against COSATU has now lead to us taking on a more defensive position - the 'Hands off COSATU' campaign - it has meant us turning a lot of resources and energy into that defensive position, although the 'Hands off' campaign is not entirely defensive." 8

#### References

1. Interview with COSATU, June 1987
2. *ibid.*
3. Interview with CCAWUSA official, May 1987
4. Interview with SARHWU, June 1987
5. Interview with TGWU official, May 1987
6. Interview with PWAU official, May 1987
7. Interview with COSATU, *ibid*
8. *ibid*

Postscript: This article is based on an interview with COSATU headquarters and a survey of all affected unions.

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