

REGIONAL FOCUS:

Trade union strategies in an integrated Southern Africa:

From policy declarations to organisational strategies and political and economic policies?

With a democratic South Africa now part of the Southern African Development Community, and South African business poised to move into a dominating role in the African sub-continent, trade unions in Southern Africa are faced with the simultaneous challenges of working out effective strategies towards government, business – and each other – in an integrated Southern African economy. DOT KEET² reports.



The ANC/national unity government's involving of South Africa in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), may be largely a formal political gesture, while its main concern is getting on with the 'more pressing' tasks of national reconciliation and reconstruction within South Africa. In this situation, the potential for the SADC countries to negotiate optimal mutual development co-operation and integration may well be postponed ... or weakened.

However, the process of *de facto* Southern African economic 'integration' already under way will proceed apace through the extension of the existing imbalanced trade relations, overwhelmingly in South Africa's favour, and an increasing involvement by South African business throughout Southern Africa. Such *laissez*

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faire processes will revive and perpetuate South Africa's economic domination of the whole subcontinental region, reinforce the grossly uneven development between South Africa and the other countries of Southern Africa, and could also carry negative effects and divisive implications for labour.

South African trade unionists say they are not opposed *per se* to South African business operating in other countries in the Southern African region but, as FAWU Assistant General Secretary Ernest Buthelezi says, "it should not be at the expense of workers on either side". On the South African side, this means that the trade union rights, wages and conditions that have been achieved so far, as well as jobs, should not be threatened by the regional operations of South African business. This is particularly marked when relocation from South Africa to neighbouring countries is undertaken expressly because, as South African managers often tell their workers, "we will not be hampered by troublesome unionists like you". On the 'other side', in Southern Africa, it means that business should not be able to take advantage of the wide differences in (or absence of) trade union and worker rights, and sharp disparities in wage levels and employment conditions to engage in "social dumping" – moving around the region exploiting such inequalities and inequities, in the name of "the operation of market forces", for business profit.

It was within such perspectives that the "Social Charter on the Fundamental Rights of Workers in Southern Africa" was drawn up in 1990-91 by the two major South African trade union federations, COSATU and NACTU, and the ten national trade union organisations united in the Southern African Trade Union Coordination Committee (SATUCC). This workers charter demands

- ❑ firm guarantees on the rights of workers and the "upward harmonisation" of conditions of employment throughout the region;
- ❑ full and unfettered trade union rights and

- far-reaching broader social, economic and political roles for trade unions;
- ❑ obligations on business, especially on information disclosure, in both national and regional operations; and
- ❑ elements of regional tripartism between organised labour, business and governments, mainly through the Southern Africa Labour Commission (SALC).

At the same time, repeated references are made to the rights of workers to organise, associate and form trade unions "independent from the state and employers", and for trade unions to conduct their work "without state interference". This is in clear reference to the difficult experiences of trade unionists in recent years throughout Southern Africa with the highly interventionist role of governments in labour and trade union affairs. Yet, the SATUCC workers charter also concludes that "the onus" for the implementation of the charter's objectives "must lie with national governments and existing regional structures as they carry responsibility for adopting social legislation, preventing social dumping and promote equitable growth."

The role of national governments

As with their formal endorsement of many OAU declarations and resolutions, most of the SADC governments have done little to translate the SATUCC charter's terms into enforceable national laws and regulations. In fact, many governments in the region are looking towards a *deregulation* of labour relations under IMF (or 'home grown') structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). This is most clearly evident in Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia, but also in Botswana, without a formal SAP, and has even been posed in South Africa in recent years under 'creeping' structural adjustment measures.

Such deregulation is being promoted as part of broader drives towards the liberalisation of the economies of Southern Africa, including the creation of free trade

or export processing zones (EPZs) with 'favourable' labour conditions. It is such government inducements to foreign investment, and reluctance to pass legislation protecting labour, that lie behind the SATUCC charter's reference to "unscrupulous governments" as well as employers exploiting lower labour standards and rights.

These trends have been encouraged by South African business and the South African government which have – for political as well as economic reasons – been moving rapidly, especially since 1990, through new openings into the neighbouring countries and further afield into Africa. For their part, too, Southern African governments, driven by pressing economic, social and political needs have been energetically seeking trade and investment deals with South African government and business. These include offers of joint ventures with both their private sectors and state enterprises in mining, manufacturing, agriculture, commerce and tourism. Such bilateral deals between South African enterprises and the burgeoning private and parastatal entrepreneurs in Southern Africa – with close links into their respective political, bureaucratic and managerial elites – could create powerful vested interests in a very different kind of 'regional co-operation' than labour needs in Southern Africa.

Organised labour is clearly aiming for a regulatory labour law regime across Southern Africa that will remove the inequalities in worker and trade union rights and reduce the disparities in conditions of employment – even if it is not yet feasible to reduce the huge wage disparities. Such regulations will eliminate at least part of the basis for divisive and exploitative business operations between South Africa and the rest of the region.

However, on the record of most governments in the region there are few indications of a willingness to pass legislation to empower trade unions nationally and regionally, and even less so

in the far-reaching ways proposed in the SATUCC charter. Thus the trade unions' commitment at the end of the charter to "struggle side by side" for its full implementation will probably prove to be necessary. The question is whether existing trade union organisations have the will and capacity for such joint struggles for a harmonised and just labour regime across Southern Africa.

Regional and national trade union organisation

So far, SATUCC has hardly been an effective "vehicle for strengthening the union movement in the subcontinent" as anticipated at COSATU's Fourth Congress in 1991. According to Zimbabwean trade union leader Morgan Tsvangirai, SATUCC has merely been a centralised bureaucratic structure of top trade union officials meeting periodically for formal exchanges and official agreements that few have any intention or means to implement. As such it has been uncomfortably similar to the SADC government structures with which it has been too closely identified and upon which it has been too much focused, as SACCAWU general secretary Papi Kganare observed. However, as Muzi Buthelezi acting General Secretary of the South African Chemical Workers Industrial Union says, SATUCC's top-down approach, lack of independent dynamism and active leadership is also largely a reflection of the weaknesses in the national trade union organisations of which it is composed.

The national trade union centres in Southern Africa reflect – and are themselves also partly responsible for – similar weaknesses in most of their member unions. Trade unions are seldom firmly work-place based, lack active membership participation and do little to service their members. They are weak in organisational and financial skills, and financial and other

"Regional unions are seldom firmly work-place based"

resources.

The 'trade union unity' achieved in the past by legislation creating single national trade union centres is now being eroded by the combined effects of labour deregulation, the newly introduced political pluralism and freedom of association. Disunity is also being deliberately encouraged by some government labour departments, and aggravated by the power plays of self-serving trade union bureaucrats. In Lesotho, Swaziland, Zimbabwe and Mozambique the official trade union centres are faced with the disaffiliation of some unions – and the creation of new unaffiliated unions.

As trade unions in Southern Africa struggle to come to terms with their changing legal status, their traditional role is also being challenged by structural adjustment programmes. SAPs are hitting trade unions in Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe through growing unemployment. Furthermore, the socio-economic impact of SAPs upon working people is also demanding of trade unions all over the region an unaccustomed broader social role, with other mass organisations, for which they are ill-prepared.

The unions in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, and in Mozambique and Angola especially; but also in Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland for different reasons are emerging from subordinate relationships to their ruling parties in the past. They are having to learn almost from scratch the very basics of independent collective bargaining unionism – as well as the demands of campaigning 'social movement' unionism in situations of serious economic crises.

These problems are leading to the emergence of new multi-faceted organisational strategies amongst trade unions in the subcontinent going beyond the broad policy approach of the SATUCC workers charter.

'New trade union organisational strategies

Following decisions on regional trade

union relations at their 1991 congress, more active interactions by COSATU and its affiliates

with trade unions in Southern Africa have rapidly taken the COSATU unions beyond their over-optimistic earlier expectations of SATUCC. By the end of 1992, proposals at a COSATU workshop on international relations noted that SATUCC, as it has functioned hitherto, "cannot play its important role" and recommended that "all SATUCC structures should be completely overhauled".

Developing SATUCC

This was the message, too, of SATUCC's new acting general secretary, Zimbabwe's Morgan Tsvangirai, when he opened a SATUCC "leadership planning forum" in Johannesburg in November 1992. The three day forum agreed on proposals to strengthen SATUCC itself and develop its role, starting with a campaign to popularise the workers charter with trade unionists throughout Southern Africa. This was to be accompanied by investigations by national labour centres on progress by their governments in legislating the terms of the charter. They reported on the findings to the meeting of the tripartite Southern African Labour Commission (SALC) in the first quarter of 1994 and agreed to expose resistant governments through regional and international information and other campaigns.

The November 1993 SATUCC leaders meeting also agreed on a plan of action to set up regional industrial committees, undertake a priority data collection and research programme and assist national centres with their organisational needs and their democratic development. There will also be educational programmes, drawing on the resources and experiences of other trade unions within Southern Africa and beyond.

"... power plays of self-serving trade union bureaucrats..."

Democratising national federations

However, the restructuring of SATUCC to play an effective role in developing a strong trade union movement in Southern Africa depends, itself, upon the development of the bureaucratic trade union 'centres' into independent and democratic national trade union organisations in each of the countries of the region.

The lack of trade union dynamism and unity, and the active disaffection of some unions, has undoubtedly partly been the result of the lack of democratic accountability and responsiveness to their members' needs by the established national trade union centres. However, making national trade union leaderships more active and responsive will depend upon the development of the industrial/sectoral unions on the ground into more active components (or creators) of democratised national federations.

Strengthening sister unions

It was within a growing awareness of such problems that a COSATU seminar on international relations in October 1992 reinforced the 1991 Fourth Congress recommendation that COSATU itself should strengthen its relations with Southern African (and African) national labour centres. It also urged that "all [COSATU] affiliates should twin with their sister unions" organising in the same sectors in order to share experiences, exchange information, combine in training workshops and other programmes and plan joint research projects and so on.

Another COSATU congress resolution in 1991 declared that regional solidarity "should not be based only on relations between unions and national centres. We need to encourage worker-to-worker contact aimed at promoting unity in action".

Furthermore, "decentralised, horizontal, flexible and informal" worker-to-worker relations – for example through study tours by trade unionists from the rest of Africa to South Africa – will be useful to introduce them to COSATU's model of socially

engaged democratic unionism.

The most effective and cost-effective forms of interaction, co-operation and mutual strengthening of the diverse Southern African trade unions is on the common terrain of their day to day engagement: the sectors in which they organise and the companies with which they deal. Thus such bilateral relations between unions organising in the same sectors in Southern Africa are being extended through multi-lateral exchanges into regional industrial co-operation. Furthermore, with the 'regionalisation' of business, industry-based regional co-operation is an appropriate organisational response by Southern African trade unions.

Creating regional industrial federations

The Southern African Mineworkers Federation (SAMF) is the longest established and most effective of such regional industrial co-operation amongst sister unions – which, in part, reflects that they organise within the most highly developed and integrated economic sector in Southern Africa. Organising not only in the same sector but even largely in the same few companies, the miners unions in Southern Africa can, through their regional federation, more effectively share research and information – especially on South African MNCs; co-operate in education and training – particularly of union organisers and shaft stewards; and exchange experiences in improving conditions of work – especially in health and safety.

There is also a new strategic approach emerging to organise regional/company shaft steward councils and to co-ordinate collective bargaining within the same companies across the region – as with the powerful De Beers company. Such joint union negotiation strategising would mirror the mutual consultation and strategic planning of the subsidiaries of the same company operating in the various countries of Southern Africa. Furthermore,



Zimbabwe 1992: Police called in to crush the Railway workers strike,

“... the highly interventionist role of the government in labour and trade union affairs”

as NUM former assistant general secretary Marcel Golding pointed out at the time, joint bargaining can embrace not only standardisation of recognition agreements and harmonisation of employment conditions but even take up the issue of common (or, at least, converging) wage rates.

The COSATU international relations seminar towards the end of 1992 recommended SAMF as a model for other unions to follow in the region. Southern African construction workers unions have had a Southern African Federation of Building Workers since 1985, but seriously limited resources keep them largely dependent on regional meetings of their International Trade Secretariat, the IFBWW, for their face-to-face exchanges and co-operation. Metal workers and commercial workers unions are developing regional industrial co-operation using the regional structures of their respective ITSs, the International Metalworkers Federation and Afro-FIET. COSATU recommends

that “industrial unions affiliated to the same ITS should work closely” with and within them for “access to sister unions in the region with a view to establishing sectoral unity.” Some COSATU affiliates, such as FAWU and PPWAWU have attempted to take independent initiatives to build up contacts between union counterparts in Southern Africa with a view to establishing regional organisations across their respective industrial sectors. (see box page 82)

Convergent needs and divergent interests

Such organisational endeavours carry significant potential for the regional co-operation and the strengthening of the Southern African trade union movement appropriate to the emerging regional economy in which they find themselves. However, active trade union co-operation in Southern Africa will have to be created within the crisscrossing lines of both convergent needs and divergent interests

amongst union leaders and amongst workers in Southern Africa.

There is enormous unevenness in organisational power and effectiveness amongst the various trade unions in Southern Africa and above all between the COSATU unions and almost all the others. Furthermore, the other unions will be looking to COSATU as an important source of strength – as many have in the past – at a time when the resources of all the COSATU unions are already seriously over-stretched by the demands of their involvements within South Africa.

At the same time, COSATU is so much stronger than any of the other union organisations in Southern Africa that its regional strategy has had to be consciously framed to avoid dominating the whole process. However, not all COSATU affiliates have acted with the necessary tactical sensitivity – as in the unilateral decision by SACTWU to transform itself into the *Southern African Textile Workers Union*, or the reported recruitment of members by SACCAWU in neighbouring countries.

Workers in Southern Africa may ignore national boundaries in their search for work and in their choice of unions to protect their rights, but union leaders in neighbouring countries are sensitive about encroachments on 'their' spheres by South African unions. To some extent it is correct to argue that regional trade union co-operation and regional industrial federations cannot be a substitute for national trade union organisation. The great majority of workers will continue to be employed by their governments, or by national parastatals or private companies whose operations are not regional in scope. Millions of workers are not yet unionised at all. National unions do have a role to play in differing national terrains, and vis-a-vis national governments and they must be strengthened for that role by regional trade union co-operation.

However defence by union leaders of national turf can also be a mere

opportunistic defence of political power bases ... and their own livelihoods. Furthermore, incumbent trade union leaders may also come to feel threatened by the effects of a new more active and democratic unionism that will develop with the kind of worker-to-worker and direct union to union relations being developed in the region. Further recourse to 'non-interference in national affairs' may well be utilised to fend off pressures on bureaucratic power and privilege.

Such political opportunism is particularly dangerous because, simultaneously with common worker interests, there *are* different – and potentially divisive – effects of the operations of South African and international capital across the region. What will be job losses in some sectors in South Africa will be welcomed as job gains for workers and deprived communities in neighbouring countries.

There are similarly divergent effects of a regionalised economy upon labour within South Africa. While some plants especially in labour-intensive manufacturing sectors will be relocated from South Africa to exploit neighbouring workers; the extension of the operations of other enterprises, such as mining, construction and engineering, commerce and transport, could actually be of indirect (if marginal) benefit to their employees back in South Africa.

However, what labour everywhere face in common – in an integrated Southern African economy, as in an integrated global economy – is the capacity of capital to move rapidly from area to area. Critical choices face all the trade unions in Southern Africa as to whether they are going to follow traditional trade union strategies of co-operation, mutual support and solidarity to present a united face and push standards up for all their respective members in the longer run; or to go along with the logic of 'the market' – with national competition for South African or international investment creating

downward pressures on wages throughout the region.

Southern African metalworkers at a regional seminar in April 1992 agreed that where companies claim that their movement from one country to another creates jobs, unions "should co-operate to prevent companies playing off workers in different countries against one another". Where "jobs are lost in one country to create jobs in another", the unionists stressed that the respective trade unions should still "discuss openly ways to protect all workers". One suggestion was that the national federations in all the countries of Southern Africa should strive for foreign investment codes that incorporate minimum conditions of employment, which all companies would have to respect throughout Southern Africa.

Worker co-operation or national competition

It is by no means certain that the separate national governments in Southern Africa

have the will, or capacity to create such co-ordinated investment codes. Nor is it certain that it will be such far-sighted co-operation that all current union leaderships will opt for. As CAWU general secretary Mathew Olifant put it, there are many union leaders in Southern Africa who are "more linked to their governments than they are to other unions in the region".

What is more, some trade unionists, and others, in South Africa itself may make similar narrow nationalist choices within 'national reconstruction programmes' - short-sightedly believing that it is possible for South Africa to resolve its own internal problems ignoring the related and even worse problems in neighbouring countries which will inevitably overflow into South Africa - especially in the shape of economic refugees. Faced with the crisis of unemployment in South Africa, a democratic government may adopt a much less open position on migrant labour and on work seekers' rights of immigration into South



Zimbabwe '92: Arrested Railway workers' wives march to demand their release

"Incumbant trade union leaders in the region may also come to feel threatened by a more active and democratic unionism"

Africa than what is envisaged in the SATUCC charter's call for "freedom of movement, residence and employment throughout the region".

The SATUCC charter recognises the moral right of workers throughout Southern Africa to benefit from a regional economy dominated by the South African economy which their migrant labour from/throughout Southern Africa helped to create. The more far-sighted union leaders are also aware of the strategic importance of combatting different rights and divisive solutions amongst workers and of building common worker identities and alliances with firm programmatic and organisational bases.

The SATUCC workers' charter includes a prohibition on any discrimination in employment, including on the grounds of nationality. It also demands the extension of the same trade union rights and employment conditions to all migrant as national workers. This includes the rights of migrant workers to join trade unions whatever their countries of employment; to receive housing allowances and the right to have their families with them at their places/countries of employment; and to maintain accumulated benefits when they return to their countries of origin.

However, whatever is done to improve migrant labour as a formal contract labour system, and whatever related legislation is passed, the migration – legal or illegal – of workers in search of jobs will continue to grow as long as there are huge economic differences between South Africa and the other countries of the region. Conscious of the dangers of competition and conflict between 'national' and 'foreign' workers, under conditions of vast unemployment and poverty, trade unionists such as CWIU's Muzi Buthelezi, stress that the most fundamental solution lies in more balanced regional economic development and employment opportunities being created in all the countries of Southern Africa. As NUMSA education officer Tony Ruiters put it, "we need a job creation

strategy not only in South Africa but for the whole region." These are important indications of a broadening economic response within the trade unions in South Africa to the challenges posed to labour by the regionalised economy that will – either by design or *de facto* – emerge in Southern Africa.

Political – and economical – strategies

The trade unions in Southern Africa seem to be developing multi-sided – organisational and political strategies.

1. The first aspect has been to work out a common trade union position on fundamental trade union and workers rights across the region and to get this confirmed in law. This will require joint trade union campaigning and even pressure to ensure that governments' formal political commitment to the SATUCC workers charter is actually acted upon.
2. However, governments in Southern Africa are part of the problem as well as necessary to the solution. One response adopted by trade unions is to *change* their governments – as the Zambian unions attempted in putting the MMD into power. But even to play a role in changing government *policies*, trade unions need to be stronger and more independent and this is what regional co-operation seems to be designed to achieve.
3. At the same time, trade union regional strategies are not focused only on winning governments to their side for the regulation of labour and business relations in Southern Africa. The unions seem to be 'hedging their bets' by moving towards improving conditions and wages directly through bilateral or multilateral, and regional as well as national collective bargaining with their common employers.
4. This carries similar advantages to national collective bargaining. However, to have fullest effects in

combatting 'social dumping' on a regional scale, the gains achieved will have to be extended to entire regional industrial sectors, and beyond unionised workers to the broader working populations of these countries. These are the same questions arising from national collective bargaining – 'writ large' on a regional scale. This too points to the need for labour to achieve a democratically controlling regulatory role vis a vis governments on the regional plane as on the national stage.

However, on the regional plane, as on the national, trade unions are going to have to take a more active and informed role in the development of appropriate regional economic strategies. Organised labour has a powerful interest in ensuring that regional co-operation does not remain at the formal/rhetorical political level – either in SATUCC or in the governmental structures of SADC. If it does, a regionalised economy will continue to be created by, and in the interests of, business – with the co-operation of weak and accommodating, separate and competing national governments – to the detriment of workers throughout the region.

The SATUCC workers charter calls for the right of trade unions to "participate in the social, economic and political decision-making process at all levels" in Southern Africa. The major challenge to them lies in assuming a more active role in making Southern Africa more than just a routine item tacked on at the end of policy declarations. Organised labour has to recognise and make Southern African co-operation a live issue, democratise the debates and make its own effective inputs towards negotiated Southern African economic co-operation and integration for combined, balanced and mutually beneficial development. ☆

Southern and Northern relations

Another set of challenges for Southern African – and Northern – trade unions relates to the existing central role of ITSs in organising, and largely setting the agendas of industry-based meetings in Southern Africa. Resource-strapped African unions need to be able to benefit from the experience, skills and solidarity of their Northern counterparts, and to use such meetings to consolidate their own essential South-South relations. COSATU recommends that "industrial unions affiliated to the same ITS should work closely together". Similarly, "proper working relations" should be developed between SATUCC and ITS structures in Southern/Africa, as well as the ICFTU's Southern African Co-ordinating Committee and the AFL-CIO's African-American Labour Centre.

There is, however, a conviction amongst unionists in Southern Africa that some ITS regional structures, and the ICFTU's Southern African Co-ordinating Committee, see themselves as being the sufficient organisational base for Southern African trade union co-operation. In such a situation, the agenda of Southern African regional co-operation could remain confined to the more narrowly focused traditional collective bargaining unionism of most of the Northern ITS members. Such skills are a necessary but insufficient basis for trade unions to play their necessary roles in the particular situations of southern Africa. Agendas set and controlled by the ITSs could constrict innovative trade union developments appropriate to the situation in Southern Africa – and the South in general.