

The local government transition

*what role
for trade
unions?*



Now trade unions are confronted with the transition to local government democracy. The question is, to what extent and in what form should they become involved? SAMWU national education officer JOHN MAWBY raises the questions.

This article aims to address some strategic concerns in the local government transition as a basis for further debate within trade unions. We need to devise an approach to prevent the local government transition from undermining the union movement through an exodus of leadership.

At the same time we need to ensure working class empowerment in local government. I believe that engagement with the transition is essential to the retention and strengthening of COSATU's "social movement union" traditions as opposed to those strands in its "political union" traditions which underlie the exodus at other levels. Our engagement must focus on the need to build the organs of civil society and not only on electoral politics, drawing up candidate lists and campaigning for the ANC.

Examining civil society

The question is, to what extent should COSATU take on the role of promoting the ANC election campaign – and give up leadership to sit on councils – and to what extent our effort should be directed to maintaining and strengthening "civics" and/or "civil society" during and after local government elections?

In dealing with the latter question, some comment on the SA National Civics Organisation (SANCO) is necessary. Historically, through overlapping leadership, SANCO has been closely identified with COSATU and many shopstewards are members or leaders of local SANCO civics.

Two immediate policy questions need to be explored. Is COSATU's policy to promote the "SANCO project"? If so,

what is the nature of this project?

SANCO was set up in the wake of the demise of the UDF. It grew out of the perceived need at the time to co-ordinate the "civics" movement, which had been at the base of much UDF activity (the "liberation movement" and "political party" aspects of the UDF's activities were to revert to the ANC and SACP). As SANCO has emerged, there has been an ongoing tension over the nature of its structure. Is it akin to a "trade union federation" of civics, drawing on the strongly unitary structure of COSATU as the model? Or are civics by their nature grounded in particularities of local struggles? And does the attempt to impose a strongly unitary structure determining unitary national policies merely undermine the vibrancy of local initiatives?

Is the model of a "civic" which represents a broader community a non-starter because it is actually composed of different communities with often very contradictory needs? According to one analysis, the form of development of "civics" during the 1980s can be attributed to the lack of democratic local government, so that civics are in effect "local governments in waiting"? If so, then democratisation of local government will dissolve the glue which has kept them together. A variety of bodies will emerge representing single interest issues of particular fractions of the community, be they rate-paying property owners, tenants, squatters or local organisations with a base in a particular development project.

If COSATU does engage, does it do so with a conception that it is obligated to SANCO in particular? Or does it intervene to help build a coalition of all interest groups and progressive community-based organisations (CBOs) aimed at empowering civil society in all its forms? There is every need for a project that attempts to bring together different interest groups within broader communities. There is a need to establish

co-ordination and mutual support between different fractions of the community and other more "single interest" formations concerned with the environment, sports and recreation, women or youth. The question is: will this best be achieved through backing SANCO's development or through establishing looser "Civic Forums" as a form of coalition which reinforces the "watch dog" capacities of civil society, and includes COSATU as one such organ?

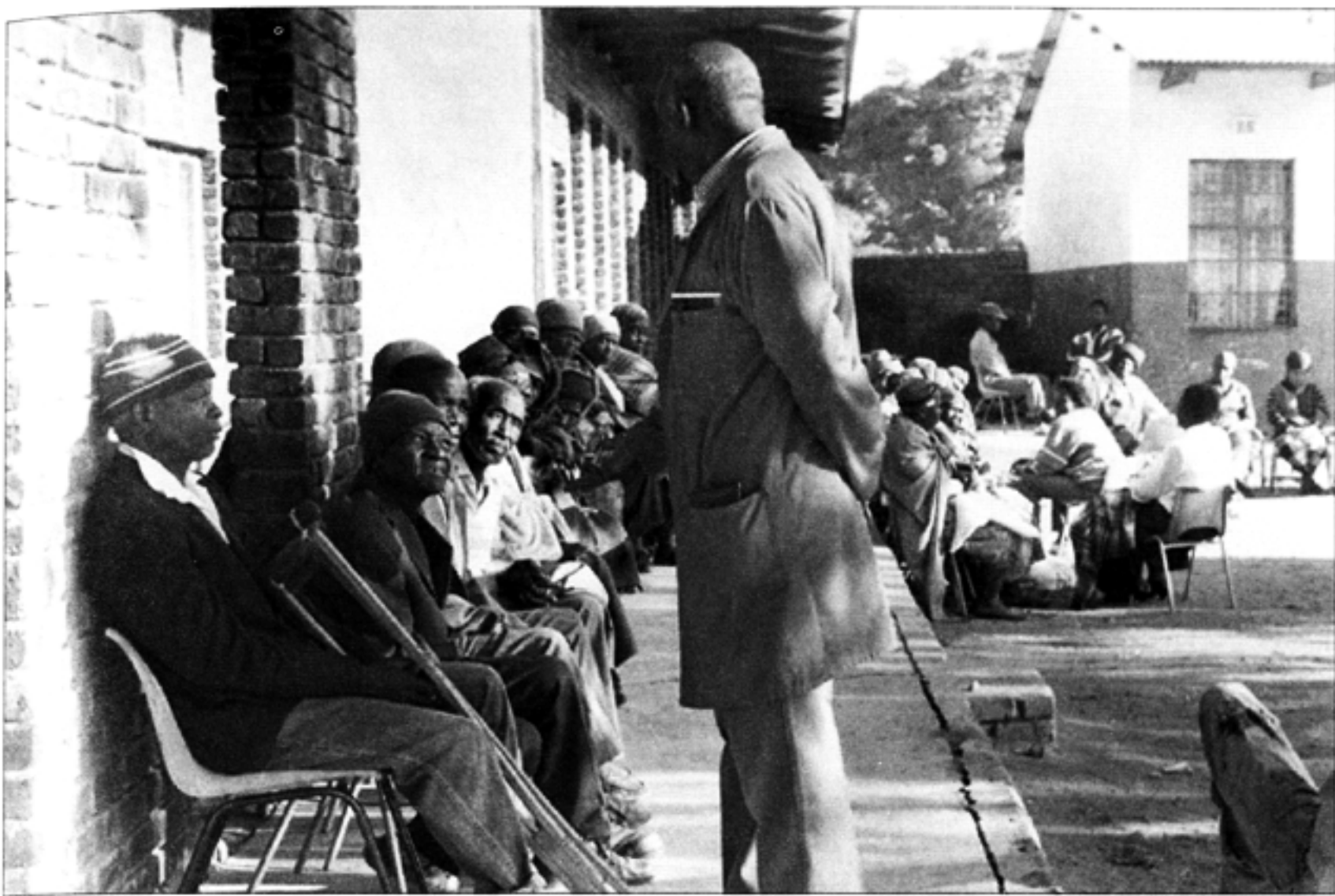
It is critical that these questions be addressed. SANCO has been grappling with these matters but there is a need for much more rigorous interaction and analysis between COSATU and SANCO (as the two most prominent existing organs of civil society) on the nature of the project needed for the empowerment of civil society.

What of the alliance?

As part of the alliance, any electoral effort will be through the ANC. Clearly any process between COSATU and SANCO does not replace co-ordination within the alliance on the electoral challenge. SANCO is not a formal party to the alliance.

It is not compulsory that local government elections are fought on a party political basis. The ward level, in particular, can be contested by independents or persons supported by non-party political formations. Political party contestation in the proportional representation side of the electoral system also allows bodies other than political parties to field candidates. This raises the possibility of some civics contesting the elections. At the same time, most candidates are likely to be party political, questions of possible united front approaches with other parties (eg, PAC and AZAPO) will need to be addressed by the alliance.

The central challenge is in every community, down to a very local level. How can an effective electoral alliance be



COSATU committed resources and candidates to the national elections: can it do so again?

forged?

The reality in vast parts of the country is that neither ANC branches nor civic structures have solid organisational structures rooted in a mass base. The debate about the roles of ANC branches and SANCO civics remain unresolved and the conflict between leadership groupings resounds. The civic has often become the base for leadership who missed out in the ANC branch. There is also extensive overlapping leadership. This means that, even where there is awareness within the civic on the need to strengthen the “watch dog” role, there is the contrary pressure to go into councils on behalf of the ANC.

COSATU could play an important role in mediating or resolving these leadership contestations. It could assert the need for serious efforts to build a stronger, more organised base and to maintain and strengthen existing organs of civil society.

There also needs to be a serious effort to examine what other organisations within civil society exist within a

community.

These may be women’s or youth groups, or organisations or people involved in single issue concerns ranging from self-help projects or primary health care to sports and environmental groups. Local government interfaces very directly with the concerns of all of these groupings. The community leadership which might win an election may not necessarily be activists in positions of political or community leadership, but rather persons engaged in practical community projects who have avoided high profile leadership contests.

In any such endeavour, we need to avoid any “COSATU arrogance” or becoming another factional force. Equally, however, the other parties need to get off their high horses and together seek to deepen the mass-based participation which backs up any choice of councillors.

The role of locals

The key structures which need to function

for COSATU to play a role are the locals backed by provincial co-ordination.

In the debate about the strengthening of locals, a central question must be on their role in building solidarity with the community and not only questions of industrial area-based solidarity.

Historically, some of the most prominent COSATU local struggles hinged on mobilising community support for consumer boycotts to support striking workers or on providing industrial worker support for demands arising in workers' communities. It is this tradition of locals which needs to be revived in building civil society.

In this regard in the Western Cape metropolitan area (not for the first time) a debate has arisen about the nature of locals as industrial or community-linked structures. This need not be an either /or debate. Making linkages into communities needs flexibility. Where people work and where they live – and should be involved in their community – are generally two different things.

In smaller towns in the country districts, the same local can generally deal with industrial and community issues. It is in the major urban areas that considerable divergence can occur.

For example, to be effective in local government issues in the Cape Metropolitan areas, "Community Locals" should draw together shopstewards who live in a particular community. The choices regarding internal boundaries within the metropolitan areas, on wards within these sub-councils, and on who from the community should be put forward as councillors must be determined at this level.

Should unions put forward shopstewards as councillors?

This question is naturally top of the agenda, especially given that the Special Congress resolved that we should do so.

It should be noted that, in most towns and smaller cities, the role of councillors is

part-time. Meetings generally take place after hours and the existing and traditional system does not treat councillors as full-time paid representatives, as is the case with provincial legislatures and parliament. In major cities and metropolitan councils, at least some councillors – currently those serving on Executive Committees – do need to apply themselves full time to their duties. In a general sense, the larger the local authority the greater the time councillors need to devote to their work.

This status of councillor needs to be addressed. In the larger authorities, it could be outmoded to consider such political representatives as merely part-time. However, the status quo is that councillors are not fully remunerated and have to remain employed. It could be possible to remain a shopsteward while being a councillor. In any event, we need to ask ourselves how the working class in a more general sense is empowered for participation. We could argue that low level allowances for councillors are retained and reinforced to prevent councillor status being a matter of income. There is virtue in having working class councillors who have to remain on the shopfloor and within the working class. The real question is to ensure that management is obliged to allow time off for them to perform council duties.

In deciding whether to participate in the "lists", it should be taken into account that many shopstewards and union officials are active leaders in their civic, ANC or SACP branch, and may willingly or unwillingly come under pressure to stand as councillors. COSATU affiliates need to ask themselves whether their lack of attention to local government dynamics may not be more damaging than informed choices and strategic debates within their ranks about the issues and terms of engagement. Where union leadership is involved, the extent to which they are mandated representatives of COSATU must be clear. There is a danger that "COSATU" can be used as a hat of convenience by persons with councillor ambitions. 