

## Drawing the Battle Lines

The newly-launched United Workers Union of SA may not have much power as a trade union federation. But, argues PHILLIP VAN NIEKERK, the coming battle between UWUSA and COSATU has national political implications for a wide range of organisations.

On May Day this year, at a rally in Durban's Kings Park Stadium attended by between 60 000 and 80 000 people, the Inkatha-linked federation - the United Workers Union of South Africa (UWUSA) - was launched.

UWUSA's launch represented the drawing of battle lines between Inkatha and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Fundamentally this battle is a political struggle between Inkatha and the forces politically identifying with a Congress position.

Apart from the implications for the trade union movement, the battle is significant for the political future of Natal. Inkatha's real strength is now under scrutiny. The battle between UWUSA and COSATU will reveal the extent of Inkatha's strength to progressive organisations - a lesson which it would be unwise to ignore.

### UWUSA AND THE COSATU LAUNCH

The emergence of UWUSA appears likely to take a back seat to the overall attempts by Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Inkatha to extend their power base through initiatives which include the KwaNatal 'indaba'.

But for the direct catalyst in the formation of UWUSA one has to return to COSATU president Elijah Barayi's speech at COSATU's launch on 1 December last year.

Barayi attacked the 'puppet homeland' leaders, singling out Chief Buthelezi for special attention. At the same time COSATU adopted a policy sympathetic to disinvestment.

A resolution at its inaugural congress

- though unclear in parts - said all forms of international pressure, including disinvestment, were an 'essential and effective form of pressure on the South African regime and we support it'.

The resolution on disinvestment went directly against the policy of Buthelezi who was involved in a high-profile international campaign against sanctions and disinvestment.

According to Buthelezi: 'Members of Inkatha who are members of COSATU came to me at Ulundi on their own, uninvited by me, to complain about what Mr Barayi their president had stated as the policy, and that he had no mandate to speak as he had done.'

'I did not want to have any of my fingers in the trade union pie but when members of Inkatha challenged me to assist them, I could not refuse them that assistance'.

### INKATHA AND FOSATU

However, COSATU unionists say that tensions between Inkatha and one of COSATU's predecessors, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), had come to the surface long before the formation of COSATU. There were suspicions for some time that Buthelezi was planning a rival union federation.

For years FOSATU had an uneasy truce with Inkatha. Thousands of Natal workers found their political home with Inkatha but their labour home in the various FOSATU affiliates.

Buthelezi spoke at the launch of the Northern Natal branch of FOSATU and the two organisations actively worked

together on occasion. The Empangeni bus boycott of 1985, for instance, was coordinated by a committee composed jointly of Inkatha and FOSATU people.

But before 1 December, substantial divisions had manifested themselves, the clearest of these being the consumer boycott of white shops in Howick, called to put pressure on employers following the mass dismissal of workers at the nearby BTR Sarmcol plant.

Inkatha representatives forced the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) to call the boycott off - an action which led to substantial friction and bad blood between Inkatha and FOSATU.

Barayi's speech of 1 December - and Inkatha's reaction to it - probably did little more than crystallise an already emerging problem. But at the same time it raised issues which went far beyond union matters in Natal and touched on the national political debate.

#### FORCING POLITICAL CHOICES

*The formation of COSATU coincided with the general movement of the emerging unions into an alliance with other progressive organisations.*

Though FOSATU had increasingly participated in political campaigns such as the November 1984 Transvaal stayaway, it never reached the point of being identified with any specific political grouping. For this reason it was no contradiction for Inkatha members to belong to FOSATU unions.

From December 1985, following its launch, COSATU moved towards an increasing identification with the United Democratic Front (UDF) on a local political level and held cordial talks with the African National Congress (ANC) in Lusaka.

A joint communique after the Lusaka meeting was explicit about COSATU's stand on the ANC: 'There was a common understanding that the Pretoria regime

and the ruling class of South Africa are powerless to provide any real and meaningful solutions to the general crisis, that lasting solutions can only emerge from the national liberation movement, headed by the ANC, and the entire democratic forces of the country, of which COSATU is an integral part'.



**Ardent Inkatha supporter at UWUSA rally**

COSATU was doing something FOSATU had never done: forcing workers to make a political choice on the basis of their

trade union membership, which was now aligned to the progressive forces from which Inkatha was excluded.

On one hand, it was insensitive to the thousands of COSATU members who belonged to Inkatha. On the other hand, the rationale had it, the political times were such that unions could no longer back off from making a decisive political choice.

In retaliation, Inkatha took the 'either or' process one step further by forcing workers to make a trade union choice between COSATU and UWUSA, which was born with the blessing and active participation of Buthelezi.

The choice which now confronts many thousands of Zulu migrant workers and workers in Northern Natal is whether their allegiance to Inkatha or COSATU is stronger, or whether they can still find a way of living with both.

If COSATU had bitten off more than it could chew by taking on Inkatha in Natal, UWUSA has probably bitten off more than it can chew by taking on COSATU nationally.

**TESTING UWUSA'S STRENGTH**

UWUSA's first test - the mass rally at Durban's Kings Park Stadium on 1 May attended by between 60 000 and 80 000 people - was an unqualified success. The second test - recruiting a large membership - seems to be well on the way, though the figures of almost 100 000 given by UWUSA general secretary Simon Conco shortly after the May Day rally are probably absurd.

UWUSA had by early May picked up three plants in the Transvaal: Jabula Foods and Gryphon Engineering on the East Rand and a dairy near Kinross. In Natal it has claimed majority at a number of plants - Erikson Brothers, Zululand Sawmills, Zululand Furniture Factory, Ulundi Bakery, Ntanzini Cartage, Pritchard Cleaners, Pioneer Seeds, Pietermaritzburg Transport, Edendale Tannery, Scottish Cable and Natal Tanning Extracts.

UWUSA's single most important recruiting strategy after Inkatha membership will be the anti-disinvestment drive which was spelled out at the opening rally.

Buthelezi asked, to roars of 'no': 'I would like to know whether, in fact, it

is your wish that disinvestment and sanctions should be imposed in South Africa. Shall I tell those overseas that you are now ready to suffer even more deprivations than you are suffering already?'

But UWUSA's third, and most important, test - servicing, holding onto and winning concrete gains for its members - is more in doubt, given the lack of depth of trade union experience in the UWUSA executive.

No unions have defected from COSATU and the only unions to read messages of support at the UWUSA's launch were the African Domestic Workers Union and the National Union of Brick and Allied Workers Union, an in-company union started at Corobrick.

Inkatha's only union affiliate before the formation of COSATU - the National Union of Sugar Refining and Allied Workers Union - was also an in-company union started by Tongaat-Hulett. It is currently facing a financial malaise and major corruption charges have been levelled against former general secretary Selby Ntsibande.

A message of support was also read from the Black Staff Association of the South African Transport Services, a union which was described by the General Workers Union during its recognition dispute with SATS four years ago as the SATS personnel department dressed up as a staff association.

Several employers were on the stage for the UWUSA launch - lending credence to COSATU claims that UWUSA will be a 'sweetheart' union formed with the active backing of employers. So far there is nothing to indicate that UWUSA will represent a major threat on the shopfloor to COSATU outside of Northern Natal - where its damage potential on the shopfloor and in terms of action against activists could be considerable.

The former president of the Metal and Allied Workers Union, Jeffrey Vilane, even though he is an Inkatha member, was recently shot, and reports of violence against COSATU members continue to be reported on a daily basis.

UWUSA officials appear to have very little real trade union experience. Its general secretary, Simon Conco, is a Kwazulu MP and an Umlazi businessman. The rest of the executive are businessmen and managers, with little experience of trade unions, who are unlikely to be much of a match for the experienced COSATU unionists.

The only major defection from COSATU - Mhlaba Gumede, the former Northern Natal chairman of the Paper, Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAU) - did not make it onto the executive.

**THE SEARCH FOR AID**

To compensate for this lack of trade union depth, UWUSA has been casting around for aid overseas and to this end met with two representatives of the American labour federation, the AFL-CIO, and its African arm, the African American Labour Centre (AALC) on 10 April.

The two men - Irving Brown, head of the international section of the AFL-CIO, and Patrick O'Farrell, director of the AALC - have both been publicly linked to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and both caused a furore when they headed a delegation to South Africa in 1982.

According to Conco, no firm offer of aid materialised from the meeting, but the AFL-CIO is likely to help individual UWUSA unions. UWUSA has cast around widely for overseas support, including in Europe and the East, and is likely to receive support from the Israelis. According to Conco: 'We want to look into what's going and will choose the best of what's on offer. Our ideal is to be worker-funded. We think its best not to get people to pay the piper and then watch them take over the union'.

**UWUSA AND NATIONAL POLITICS**

The launch of UWUSA has so far had more political than trade union impact in a province which is increasingly diverging from the rest of the country. In the first place, the crowd of between 60 000 and 80 000 which attended the launch can not simply be dismissed as

people given a free ride in from the rural areas for the day.

True, a large number were bussed in from the Transvaal and the Inkatha heartland of Northern Natal. But the launch was presented as a national launch. Also Inkatha is not the only political/union organisation which busses people in for rallies or funerals.

A large number of those present - some estimates say as many as 10 000 - were migrant workers from the hostels around Durban who streamed back to the townships in impi formation.

The rally appeared to belie polls showing that Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and his Inkatha movement have little support and are not a factor to be reckoned with.

In fact, if one compares the UWUSA rally in Kings Park with the much smaller COSATU rally at Currie's Fountain, it is the UDF, which shared the platform with COSATU, which came off worst.

COSATU is, as its general secretary, Jay Naidoo, pointed out, assured of its support on the shopfloor; the UDF has little but rallies such as that on 1 May to show public support in Natal. Since the violent conflict of August 1985, in the aftermath of the assassination of civil rights lawyer Victoria Mxenge, Durban has looked like an increasingly weak link for the UDF and its allies.

KwaNatal will further extend Buthelezi's power base throughout the province. The only real organisational opposition to Buthelezi in the area are the unions and it is in this context that the UWUSA-COSATU battle has political significance in Natal.

If UWUSA has the potential to damage COSATU on Inkatha's home ground of Natal, its emergence also has important implications for political groups which have tended too easily to dismiss Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi and his Inkatha movement.

At the very least the rally should prompt an awareness that Inkatha has very real popular support with deep cultural roots among the Zulu people.