

South Africa: Cosatu at the crossroads

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This feature of Amandla! lays bare the conflict unfolding in COSATU.

Tensions in SA's biggest labour movement play themselves out over the failure of the Polokwane project. The ANC's 2007 Polokwane Conference, which adopted a host of progressive policies, was supposed to usher in the developmental state and a jump to the left in economic and social policies.

A little more than five years later, COSATU, a main actor in constituting the Zuma block, has very little to show for its alliance with Zuma. In a number of instances the situation of the workers and the poor has worsened. A section in COSATU has become impatient with the backsliding of the Zuma regime. They have become critical of the tenderising state and the emergence of predatory elites, enabled at the very top of the ANC and government. They have taken to the streets to protest corruption, the failure to ban labour brokers, the imposition of e-tolls, the continuity with pro-business economic policies and the state's incapacity to do the most basic things.

But these criticisms have irked their erstwhile comrades in the SACP, who have seen their consistent and loyal support for Zuma bring the party to the centre of state institutions. The SACP's cadres in COSATU question the direction of COSATU under Vavi. They want someone more trustworthy and loyal to the SACP strategy in charge of COSATU. However, this is not so easy, as Vavi remains very popular among workers and COSATU members.

Underlying these differences and tensions are other conflicts and challenges. Bureaucratisation and co-optation, euphemistically called social distancing, have undermined the legitimacy of union leaderships among militant rank-and-file workers. Instead of riding the wave of this militancy to challenge bureaucratisation and facilitate organisational renewal, the General Secretary has been paralysed by fear of accusations of not defending COSATU affiliates, which has weakened him and ironically opened him to attack.

More militant and efficient unions attract members from less effective affiliates, raising the spectre of inter-COSATU rivalry divisions and splits. The rivalry between NUM and NUMSA is as much about accusations of poaching as it is about different political approaches. A dangerous situation has now emerged, with COSATU affiliates splitting, as is the case with the transport union SATAWU and the newly formed NTM. AMCU itself split from NUM. Who knows which affiliate will be next as organisational, political and corruption challenges conspire to deepen divisions.

Yet none of the troubles affecting COSATU can be understood outside the challenges associated with the changing nature of the working class. Over the last 20 years, profound changes in both the global and the national economy have created greater stratification and differentiation among workers. There is a huge gulf between the unemployed worker trapped in an informal settlement, living in a shack without basic services, and the public sector worker employed as a teacher, nurse or civil servant with a decent wage, medical aid and children in model C schools. Between them lies the labour-brokered, casualised and informalised worker with no rights, whose condition is close to that of the so-called wage slave. How does COSATU position itself as a movement that unites these different layers? NUM on the platinum mines struggled to represent the skilled, semi-skilled and the unskilled.

Not just NUM but many COSATU affiliates struggle to organise and represent the permanent as well as the contract worker, the migrant and the settled, the foreign and the local.

In this feature on COSATU, we try to foreground these issues as a way of understanding the enormous challenges facing COSATU and the broader labour movement. Developing a platform of political and organisational renewal that matches the challenges facing labour will not be easy. Most importantly, those that count themselves as friends of COSATU will be arguing for restraint, patience and unity. COSATU has achieved massive gain for workers in South Africa and internationally. Its unity must be fought for, nurtured and protected.

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P.S.

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