

South Africa - Cosatu: a house divided

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COSATU is in the midst of the biggest crisis in its 27-year history. This crisis has arisen from an SACP-driven attempt to oust democratically elected COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, under the guise of corruption charges. The conflict's roots are in longstanding political contradictions and ideological tensions between COSATU and its Alliance partners – the ANC and the SACP. At stake is not only the leadership of COSATU, but its political and moral direction.

COSATU sources reveal that the anti-Vavi faction is an alliance between the leadership of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and elements of the South African Democratic Teachers Union, the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union, and the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union. COSATU President Sidumu Dlamini leads this faction, which is in all likelihood driven by SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande and ANC General Secretary Gwede Mantashe.

Vavi's allies are in the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), the Food and Allied Workers Union, the South African Commercial and Catering and Allied Workers Union, the Democratic Nurses Organisation of South Africa, the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union and some smaller affiliates. He is also supported by neutral unions wanting to resist measures that might lead to a split. Most importantly, the majority of shop stewards in the federation largely oppose moves to oust him.

Another battle is ongoing between COSATU's two most sizable affiliates, NUM and NUMSA, who represent opposing political and union traditions. NUM represents a COSATU tradition focused on securing a closer working relationship with the ANC. NUMSA is the descendent of COSATU's 'workerist tendencies', focused on building democratic worker power on the shopfloor and critical of aligning unions too closely with the ANC. The tension between NUM and NUMSA has intensified as NUM's popularity has reached an all-time low.

The anti-Vavi campaign

Vavi has been perhaps the most consistent and incisive critic of the Zuma administration's political trajectory within the Alliance. His condemnation of a 'predatory elite', criticism of the Nkandla project, attacks on the SACP's decay and his own anti-corruption initiatives have not made him popular among the Alliance's new paranoid and patronage-ridden ruling faction, which views his open debate and critical analysis as tantamount to rejection of the Alliance.

The weapon used by the campaign against Vavi has been leaks to the media, including allegations

that he sold COSATU's old building in Johannesburg for R10-million less than its market value and awarded a tender to a company that employed his step-daughter. No proof has been produced, yet journalists have become complicit in factional politics by uncritically publishing 'stories' based on anonymous allegations.

A three-pronged inquiry into Vavi's affairs has been set up: labour lawyer Charles Nupen heads up a political commission, former SAMWU president Petrus Mashishi will look into 'organisational matters' and Sizwe Ntsaluba-Gobodo will assess COSATU's administration and finances. The inquiry will report back before the next CEC meeting in May.

Tellingly, the anti-Vavi campaign has so far been conducted behind closed doors, in typical SACP manner. Vavi's power, on the other hand, relies on his ability to appeal directly to rank and file COSATU members. His greatest defence against the political witch-hunt lies in his capacity to mobilise workers and shop stewards.

Ironically, it is Vavi's former allies in the 2008 deal to bring Zuma to power who have turned against him. The deal was designed to 'overturn the 1996 class project' – the ANC's lusty embrace of neoliberal macroeconomic policy. Although, without COSATU, Zuma might be sitting in a prison cell instead of the Union Buildings, COSATU has lost almost all the significant battles it has engaged in since Zuma's 2009 election (from the youth wage subsidy to e-tolling and the attempt to ban labour brokering).

The SACP and COSATU

Veteran trade unionist Dirk Hartford told Amandla! that the crisis is rooted in the SACP's longstanding desire to control the trade union movement by deploying its cadres in leading positions, thus centralising power in the hands of party leadership. This battle between the dominant Stalinist current in the SACP and diverse independent political currents has been ongoing since the 1980s.

The balance of forces in the COSATU leadership and CEC (Central Executive Committee) now favours the anti-Vavi, pro-SACP faction, despite the lack of popularity of COSATU President Dlamini and NUM general-secretary Frans Baleni among most COSATU workers. Vavi, on the other hand, retains mass support and is perceived as being willing to speak out of turn and put his neck on the line to defend worker interests.

The SACP leadership spends much of its time protecting Zuma's image and his government's policies from perceived enemies of the party, rather than acting on behalf of the working class. Vavi and Irvin Jim's critiques of these failures have earned them the wrath of Nzimande and Mantashe. The SACP receives a significant proportion of its funding from COSATU affiliates: for example, a few years back, NEHAWU was alleged to have used R20 million from membership dues to pay SACP salaries and hire venues for their events.

Many workers critique developments like this, as this shop steward's comments indicate:

'The role of the SACP has gone down. It is compromised by having members in Parliament. There is that reactionary clause 4.6 in the SACP that ensures this – which says if an SACP member is deployed by another organisation they are bound by the commands of that organisation. The SACP is in Parliament because the ANC deployed them. If the ANC takes a reactionary position like supporting the Youth Wage Subsidy are you then bound by that?'

The context of the crisis

This crisis also reflects structural economic shifts that have led to changes in the composition of the working class. Resulting challenges include difficulties of unionising the informal sector and the growth of precarious labour to unions' detriment. Furthermore, unions have failed to respond to the intensification of class struggle, particularly in mining and agriculture, often siding with employers rather than workers.

COSATU's ability to protect workers' interests has been called into question. As a SADTU shop steward put it, 'COSATU is seriously lacking in dealing with issues facing workers. In the current conjuncture, COSATU is not being militant but serving as a policy advisor of the state. Leaders are no longer articulating the voice of members, but their own selfish, material voice.'

He added, 'The likelihood is that those divisions are linked to groups with material interests. Underneath all this is a politics of accumulation. Our leaders have joined their government. Where is [Sydney] Mufamadi? Where is [Jay] Naidoo? Where is [Cyril] Ramaphosa? Where was he when Marikana happened? They are sitting on the other side of the fence.'

Driven by workers, in 2010 the largest public sector strikes in South African history forced direct confrontation between government and COSATU, with much of COSATU leadership 'missing in action' and some actively trying to call off the strike prematurely. Workers' fury during the strike was directed against Zuma and his administration, which had promised a government more sympathetic to the working class. Despite Vavi's comment that the federation would 'no longer give the ANC a blank cheque' during elections, the Zuma government has now moved further away from the COSATU-backed Polokwane Resolutions.

According to political analyst Steven Friedman, an obsession with 'high politics' and the ANC's leadership wrangles has led to a lack of focus on labour issues and a lack of strategic direction in COSATU. Worker revolts directed at union leadership are hardly unique. Friedman also points out that workers who have left COSATU may tire of the alternatives and eventually return, thereby forcing COSATU affiliates to reorganise in order to retain membership.

'Social distancing' – the growing gap between a rising bureaucratic caste of full-time shop stewards and union officials, on one hand, and the workers they are supposed to represent, on the other – forms a major aspect of the crisis. Leaders who sit in plush, air-conditioned offices and live in middle-class suburbs are removed from the lived realities of workers. They increasingly lack the much-needed activist background and skills borne of years of struggle on the factory floor.

What is lost is the culture of 'shopfloor democracy' that built COSATU in the first place. Union officials are often closer in experience and priorities to management than to the workers they claim to represent (although this certainly does not apply universally). The vast discrepancy between the pay packages of top union officials and average workers parallels inequality in the private sector as a whole. For example, NUM General Secretary Frans Baleni, earns some R116,000 monthly, while the average worker earns around R3,000.

Social distancing has been a major factor in a growing number of breakaway unions, as union officials are simply unable or unwilling to take up worker's demands. It was a key factor in last year's mineworker strikes leading to the Marikana massacre. NUM has lost over 100,000 members in Marikana's aftermath. Many have joined the independent Association of Mining and Construction Workers Union (AMCU), set to become the majority union in the platinum sector. Likewise, social distancing is a major factor in the formation of the National Transport Movement, a popular breakaway from the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union.

NUM's leadership seems to be in denial about the reasons for its loss of members. Even though NUM itself has quite cosy relations with mining conglomerates, it blames its membership losses on an elaborate conspiracy by mining companies using AMCU as a front to 'destroy and dislodge the mineworkers by promoting another union'.

COSATU, NUMSA, the NDP and neoliberalism

For years, senior ANC officials from Joel Netshitenzhe to Gwede Mantashe have insisted that 'our revolution' (the National Democratic Revolution) is multi-class and cannot become 'hostage to narrow sectoral interests' – that is, it cannot display a working-class bias. This stance contradicts the COSATU line, based on the Freedom Charter, that the ANC should be biased towards the poor and working class. The ANC's new gospel ANC is the National Development Plan (NSP), 'the only game in town' according to Deputy President and billionaire Cyril Ramaphosa. The NDP, however, much like Zuma's presidency, can camouflage itself enough to appeal to many different interests.

Elements of the NDP, in NUMSA General Secretary Irvin Jim's words, appear to be lifted directly from DA policy documents calling for wage suppression and 'market-driven growth'. According to NUMSA, the NDP is informed by 'the ridiculous and false belief that South Africa's mass poverty, unemployment and extreme inequalities can only be sustainably resolved by growing the economy'. This critique has triggered a rash of responses, including from arch-neoliberal Trevor Manuel, who claimed that Jim was possessed by an 'infantile disorder', and from Jessie Duarte, who accused NUMSA of being driven by 'populism'.

In turn, NUMSA press releases directly challenged the SACP leadership and its role in COSATU. In response to a letter from Jeremy Cronin, for example, Jim takes public aim (on politicsweb) at Cronin's own apologetics and at the SACP's attacks on NUMSA and Vavi. This document could, in effect, be read as a covert declaration of war on behalf of NUMSA against the SACP.

What now?

According to an unnamed COSATU senior official quoted in the Mail and Guardian, 'Most leaders at the central executive committee level do not represent the views of the workers. [Vavi's] strength lies in addressing worker issues. Most key leaders of the federation are in the SACP politburo or Central Committee. They are there to mortgage the federation. They are not in the executive committee to represent the workers, but the interests of the SACP. What made matters worse was the election of key COSATU leaders onto the ANC national executive committee'. Despite the noise made about unity at the top of COSATU and many unionists' refusal to comment in public about deep divides within the trade union federation, it is clear that it has never been more vulnerable or fractured.

In Vavi's words, 'We cannot fight silly battles against one another when our house is on fire'. COSATU's enemies are waiting like scavengers sensing weakness. This is a political battle and reflects an initiative taken by Zuma's allies to purge the Alliance of the President's critics in the run-up to next year's national election.

At the centre of this crisis is an ideological struggle for the soul of the workers' movement and its future direction. Regardless of the victor, while COSATU continues to put the ANC's political aims before its own this crisis will remain unresolved. To protect their movement, COSATU workers must stand up and openly resist the attempt to remove Vavi and force the movement to toe the party line.

Benjamin Fogel

P.S.

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* Benjamin Fogel is a freelance journalist, he writes about the intersection of politics and mass culture, labour issues and suburban alienation.