

Interview

# South Africa - Cosatu's history: coming full circle

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**Interview with Dirk Hartford, the first head of COSATU media and editor of COSATU News in the 1980's, about the implications of the current tensions in COSATU.**

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**Amandla!: What do you make of what is happening in COSATU now with the allegations against its General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi ?**

Dirk Hartford: I think what we are seeing is a direct result of the decisive victory of the Zuma-SACP faction at the December ANC Congress in Mangaung. The SACP essentially triumphed at Mangaung, and now has more people in the ANC's NEC, government and Cabinet than ever before. They are on the offensive to take out any significant opposing voices in the Alliance. Julius Malema, the ANCYL NEC, and the Limpopo NEC are already history. Now they are coming for the biggest thorn in their sides, which has always been Vavi and the independent trade union or worker views that he reflects.

**A: Do you think there is any truth in the allegations against Vavi ?**

DH: There are currently three commissions investigating Vavi on various allegations, including that he might be anti-ANC. I can't imagine on what grounds they can even consider such a charge within COSATU, which is meant to be organizationally independent of the ANC. My own feeling is that this is a carefully planned and orchestrated attack by the SACP and its allies in COSATU to try and finish him off once and for all, or at the very least tame him. They are proceeding on the basis that if they throw enough mud at him in the public arena, some will stick. It is an old tactic and one that the SACP are masters of. Whether they succeed or not will depend on the balance of forces within COSATU's leadership structures, and whether the forces within COSATU who support Vavi are prepared to fight back. It is not out of the question that this schism ends up as some kind of split in COSATU, since the SACP is determined, one way or another, to get control over organised workers. The SACP believes only it should speak for workers and it has always behaved as a kind of policeman in the workers' movement, ferreting out and getting rid of independent worker voices.

**A: So the way the battle lines are being drawn has a history in COSATU ?**

DH: Yes, this struggle has been going on in the liberation movement for a long time - certainly from before COSATU was born. One of the main issues in the unity talks that led to the formation of COSATU was the division between so-called 'workerists' and 'populists'. The workerists generally congregated around the principle of worker independence and control, and embraced a variety of political tendencies including revolutionary Marxists, syndicalists and even anarchists. The populists generally congregated around the principle of loyalty to the ANC-SACP alliance, and included

African nationalists and of course Stalinist communists. Both saw organised workers as a key constituency. Many of the workerists imagined a mass Labour Party might emerge from the trade union movement, while the populists imagined a mass SACP. In those days, the Party was virtually non-existent on the ground, but because it was banned and in exile, it still carried a lot of moral authority. The populists have been in the driver's seat and have set the pace at least since democracy was achieved. Now the SACP is the second biggest party in government and wields great power. Its key role of late seems to be to attack any independent action or voice of workers as happened at Marikana. The SACP has no interest in changing the status quo. There have been countless struggles over the years within COSATU affiliates where the SACP has used its weight, influence and organisation to try to crush independent worker politics, resulting in the expulsion of many activists.

**A: How is it then that COSATU is still independent?**

DH: Despite its best efforts, the SACP has still not managed to get its way in COSATU. It now has control of the leadership of several key affiliates like the NUM, but these unions themselves are in trouble because the gap between the rank and file and the leadership is so vast. The Party is an organization for whom COSATU principles like 'worker control' are a complete anathema. What need is there for worker control when the Party, the self-proclaimed vanguard of the working class, is there to represent workers? Everything the Party says about itself contradicts reality: it is neither revolutionary, nor communist, nor pro-worker. When did you last hear of the Party leading ANY struggle of workers? COSATU is still nominally independent to the extent that its structures are able to make their own decisions in spite of the Party line. In some unions, that is still the case as well and is therefore carried over into some COSATU structures. If the Party had had its way already, COSATU would be a completely sweetheart federation, doing what it was told. But the fact that Vavi is still there shows that this is not yet the case.

**A: Any thoughts on the future of COSATU?**

COSATU is in a very difficult situation. It is in an alliance with the ANC and SACP, who are basically running a crony capitalist state that is deeply anti-worker and pro-big business. Marikana smashed whatever illusions were left among many militant unionists. But how to go forward? Some, like the mine workers, have organised themselves into worker committees or into new trade unions. These have even given birth to a new communist organisation, the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP); it is the first time the non-Stalinist left has stepped up to the plate in the organisational battle for socialism. Others, like the Numsa leadership, are continuing the fight within COSATU and Alliance structures. The general prognosis for COSATU is not good: it will never again be able to mobilise workers as it did in the 1980's, with the dead weight of Stalinism so dominant in its structures. Vavi's best defense would be to appeal directly to COSATU members and workers in general - over the heads of the Stalinists - to mobilise and organise themselves against the bosses and their ANC/SACP government.

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