

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF COSATU

Martin Plaut

INTRODUCTION

The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions on 1 December 1985 may prove to be a watershed in the long and bitter struggle against apartheid. The founding of COSATU brings together half a million trade union members from 33 unions in the most powerful non-racial trade union movement that the country has ever witnessed. The aim of this paper is to try, even at this early stage, to assess the significance of COSATU within the South African situation. In many ways this paper takes up the themes first explored in a previous paper (Plaut, 1984). In that article it was suggested that relations between the unions and the liberation movements (and the ANC in particular) had in the past been difficult. It was pointed out that there was a tension in the analysis of the liberation movement about the role of the unions. On the one hand they were encouraged, and on the other hand they were told that because of the 'fascist' nature of the South African state, the unions were bound either to be crushed or become collaborators.

The other question that was raised was the question of democracy. To what extent should the unions be democratically answerable to their members, and to what extent should they be prepared to accept the leadership and guidance of the liberation movements in the struggle to end apartheid? The debate going on inside the South African labour movement on this subject was examined and commented upon. The question that the current paper addresses is, therefore, what has changed since early 1984?

THE UNIONS AND THE CRISIS

The last two years have been a period of deep crisis in South Africa. Opposition to the regime had been simmering throughout 1984, but in September of that year local and national issues combined to set the townships alight. Ever since there has been an escalating confrontation between the police and the army on the one hand, and the people of the townships and the rural areas on the other. As the largest organised presence in the black urban areas, the trade unions were not surprisingly drawn into the conflict. The three day stay away of November 1984, which took place in the Transvaal, was the first time that the unions mobilised their members

directly around issues concerning the communities in which they live. Not only were trade union leaders directly involved in co-ordinating the action, they also ensured that, unlike other stayaways, this one was unequivocally backed by workers. A statement from the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) after the strike concluded 'the long term implications of the stay away could include more involvement of the unions in political affairs' (LMG, 1985).

At the same time, despite a recession that put many workers out of a job, the unions managed to maintain a high degree of militancy.

STRIKES 1973 - 1985

YEAR	NO OF DISPUTES	WORKERS ON STRIKE
1973	370	98,029
1974	384	58,975
1975	276	23,295
1976	248	26,931
1977	90	15,091
1978	106	14,088
1979	101	17,323
1980	207	56,286
1981	342	84,705
1982	394	141,571
1983	336	64,469
1984	469	181,942
1985	389	239,816

Source: Karelse, *et al* (1986)

Nor was it just a question of spontaneous action from the shop floor. The last few years have seen the union movement establish itself in greater depth than ever before. According to one survey of 23 unions representing 70% of the non-racial union movement, the unions had between them 12,462 shop stewards (Lewis and Randall, 1985:76). The authors estimated that this represented a nearly three-fold growth in the number of shop stewards over just three years. The number of workplaces being organised had risen even more dramatically from 756 to 3,421 in the same period.

The formation of COSATU therefore took place at a time when two factors coincided:

- 1) The crisis in the black community was more severe than at any time

since the 1950s (including the Soweto uprising of 1976). People - mainly black youth - were dying daily in their battles with the police and army, who occupied the townships under the state of emergency.

2) The trade unions knew that they had a strength and a following that they could depend on. Years of often brutal treatment by the authorities had failed to dent the unions, which could rely on the leadership of tried and tested shop stewards, who had developed a strong tradition of democratic action, based on consultations with their members.

Confidence and militancy were therefore the hallmarks of the founding conference of COSATU, which took place over three days in Durban. 'Born into defiance' was how one sympathetic South African newspaper characterised the COSATU launch. In a fiery speech to the congress, its first president Elijah Barayi condemned the bantustans, the government, and apartheid in general and called for an end to the state of emergency, the removal of the troops from the townships and gave President Botha six months to scrap the pass laws. 'If that does not take place within six months, we will burn the passes of the black man', Barayi declared (*Weekly Mail*, 6-12.12.85). The preamble to the new federation's constitution pledged it to a 'united South Africa free from oppression and economic exploitation'.

The keynote speech to the congress, from Cyril Ramaphosa - the general secretary of the 180,000 strong National Union of Mineworkers - took a more cautious tone:

We all agree that the struggle of workers on the shop floor cannot be separated from the wider struggle for liberation. The important question we have to ask ourselves is how is COSATU going to contribute to the struggles for liberation. As unions we have sought to develop a consciousness among workers, not only of racial oppression, but also of their exploitation as a working class. As unions we have influenced the wider political struggle. Our struggles on the shop floor have widened the space for struggles in the community. Through interaction with community organisations, we have developed the principle of worker controlled democratic organisation. But our main political task as workers is to develop organisation among workers as well as a strong worker leadership. We have, as unions, to act decisively to ensure we, as workers, lead the struggle.

Our most urgent task is to develop a unity among

workers. We wish COSATU to give firm political direction for workers. If workers are to lead the struggle for liberation we have to win the confidence of other sectors of society. But if we are to get into alliances with other progressive organisations, it must be on terms that are favourable to us as workers ... Our role in the political struggle will depend on our organisational strength ... We must meet with progressive political organisations. We have to work in co-operation with them on realistic campaigns. We must not shy away and pretend they do not exist ... COSATU is going to determine the direction of the working class in this country (SALB, 1985:45-46).

The tone of Ramaphosa's address was carefully modulated but carried an important message. COSATU was to take on a political role, and would contribute to the liberation struggle in addition to its union functions. The unions would raise difficult issues about class, as well as attacking the racial discrimination at the heart of apartheid. Political initiatives would be launched by the unions themselves, in co-operation with organisations like the UDF, but only after democratic discussion within the unions. The workers - and not the community-based organisations - would determine the agenda of resistance, to ensure that the struggle was 'on terms favourable to us as workers'.

Behind the carefully chosen phrases lay a long history of controversy and debate that had been one of the major reasons why the founding of COSATU, which was discussed as early as 1979, took six difficult years to achieve. A host of issues had held up the launch, but at the heart of the discussions had been a difference of approach between those that came to be known as 'populists' and 'workerists'. The populists insisted that the political leadership of struggle against apartheid had to come from the United Democratic Front (UDF), and, by implication, from the ANC. Most of the unions that took this position were already affiliates of the UDF (such as the South African Allied Workers Union). The workerists, on the other hand, argued that the unions should follow the political line dictated by their members, with union leaders only adopting positions after the closest consultation with their members. This was the position of unions affiliated to FOSATU.

While Ramaphosa's speech is clearly in the workerist mould, the populists are well represented among the COSATU leadership. Acknowledging the tensions within COSATU, general secretary, Jay Maidoo said: 'In a federation as large as ours it's natural that there will be differences, espe-

cially in the initial stages but also because of the dynamic situation we find ourselves in. There's lots of debate going on at the moment and COSATU wants to encourage that. But make no mistake, we have enough common ground within COSATU, despite our differences, to be a very powerful and effective force in this country' (see discussion of this issue in *Work in Progress*, 40 (1986)).

COSATU AND THE ANC

The government did not have to wait long to find out just who the new federation had in mind when it talked of 'progressive organisations'. Only 8 days after its formation the new general secretary of COSATU, Jay Naidoo, went to Harare for a World Council of Churches conference. On 9 December, a statement from COSATU announced that during the conference Naidoo had met members of the ANC and its trade union wing - the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) - for informal talks. According to the announcement the talks were 'very fruitful and allowed a frank and open exchange of views'.

This first, informal meeting was reported on by Jay Naidoo to a meeting of the COSATU central executive committee held between 7 and 9 February. The meeting adopted a resolution which declared that COSATU would be independent of all political organisations, but would work with all progressive organisations in the fight against oppression. The central executive committee also agreed to send a delegation to meet the ANC to discuss policy and to clarify the goals of each organisation. The delegation was to act as a fact finding mission, and to report back to the next central executive committee meeting, scheduled for 12 and 13 April.

A high powered delegation, consisting of Jay Naidoo, his deputy, Sydney Mafumadi, and the NUM general secretary, Cyril Ramaphosa, went to Lusaka to meet the ANC on 5 and 6 March. The ANC clearly took the meeting very seriously and was represented by ANC president Oliver Tambo; John Nkadi-meng, general secretary of SACTU; Thabo Mbeki, head of information and publicity; Chris Hani of Umkhonto we Sizwe; and Mac Maharaj, a senior member of the political department (*Weekly Mail*, 07-13.03.86). At the end of the two days of talks a long joint communique was released by COSATU, the ANC and SACTU (see *SALB*, 11, 5 (1986)). The communique contains a number of points that are particularly interesting. It talked of the crisis now facing South Africa and concluded that 'lasting solutions can only emerge from the national liberation movement, headed by the ANC, and the entire democratic forces of our country, of which COSATU is an important and integral part'. At the same time COSATU is reported as agreeing

that it needed to mobilise workers in the general democratic struggle 'both as an independent organisation and as an essential component of the democratic forces of our country'. Finally, SACTU and COSATU were reported to have agreed that 'there was no contradiction whatsoever arising from their separate existence'.

The communique was the warmest, and in many ways the fullest, statement of the joint aims of the three organisations. But it did leave important questions unanswered. Firstly, what was the status of the communique? The COSATU leaders who signed it had not discussed its contents with their affiliates or members. Secondly, where did the statement leave COSATU? At its February central executive committee meeting COSATU had agreed to be politically independent, yet the communique recognised that the liberation movement was 'headed by the ANC' and that COSATU was an integral part of this movement. Did this imply that COSATU would accept the political direction of the ANC?

But there were another set of perhaps even more difficult questions for the ANC. What, for example, does the ANC expect from the union movement? What role does it envisage for the unions in the liberation struggle? In his most important speech for many years to the ANC's second national consultative congress (the first such congress since the Morogoro congress in 1969) Oliver Tambo had almost nothing to say about the workers or the unions, that had come to play such a central role in South Africa in the intervening years. His political report took up over 30 pages, devoting considerable attention to all the major political developments in South Africa (for example, the rise of the black consciousness movement received two pages) and internationally (everything from the assassination of Allende to the establishment of the New Jewel Movement in Grenada). Yet the non-racial trade union movement received no more than one sentence:

Further, having been forced to recognise the right of African workers to belong to trade unions, the Botha regime nonetheless legislated to impose further controls on the trade union movement to ensure that this movement does not emerge as an independent, democratic formation.

This dismissive attitude towards the unions is perhaps explained in an article that appears in the ANC's official journal - *Sechaba* - in April 1985. This suggested that there is no alternative to the armed struggle - the military seizure of power, and that all other forms of struggle must be subservient to this end.

The author acknowledges the existence of a powerful working class, but

argues that its true strength cannot be realised because the character of the South African state effectively prevents open organisation of black workers despite 'relaxation' of legislation. The role of workers is, therefore, to link their struggle with revolutionary violence.

In other words, all trade union action must be related to and subservient to the armed struggle, since, as the author argues, this strategic principle is 'absolute'.

On the face of it this would seem to be a restatement of the position that prevailed in the 1950s, when SACTU formed part of the Congress Alliance. South African scholars of the period have argued that it was precisely this that led to the demise of SACTU. Rob Lambert wrote in 1980 that the essence of SACTU's failure:

lay in its subordinate position within the alliance. The ANC and SACP (South African Communist Party) leadership decided on the pace of events and SACTU followed as the MEANS of realising long-term strategy. SACTU had no independent leadership ... Because of SACTU's subordinate position, decisions to launch national strike campaigns were taken with little reference to the level of preparedness and maturity of working class organisation. It was the dominance of the ANC and the SACP in the alliance that finally led to the smashing of SACTU at the very point when it was both developing a mass base and an experienced leadership. I refer here to the SACP-led decision to embark on the sabotage campaign against the state (Lambert, 1980:104)

Now it is far from clear that the ANC wishes the present union movement to repeat the mistakes of the past, or that COSATU, as the strongest part of that movement, would be prepared to accept political dictates over its industrial strategy - or even over its role in wider struggles. But the documents cited above are open to such an interpretation.

Since the ANC-SACTU-COSATU meeting a number of speeches and statements have been delivered clarifying the situation, at least as far as COSATU is concerned. On 19 March 1986 Jay Naidoo gave a talk about the political environment in which unions operate, to students at the University of Natal, in Pietermaritzburg (Naidoo, 1986). He explained the position adopted by the COSATU central executive committee, quoting first from its statement to show that workers were determined to play a role in the struggle towards a non-racial South Africa. But such a struggle would, of necessity, have to be waged in alliance with other organisations -

'progressive community organisations whose interests are compatible with the interests of workers and whose organisational practices further the interests of the working class'.

Naidoo continued:

our experience has taught us firstly, to avoid isolating ourselves as workers and defining our friends and allies too narrowly, ie the danger of workerism; and secondly, to avoid subsuming ourselves in an incoherent mass mood or populist desire for an ill-defined 'freedom', ie the danger of populism; and thirdly to choose our allies on the basis of what we know, what has been our experience as workers, and not on the basis of abstracted principles of what is or is not a 'correct' approach, ie the danger of impractical but nice sounding theories.

Discussing the allies that COSATU might forge links with, Naidoo dealt specifically with the ANC, which he referred to as 'undoubtedly the most important' potential ally, a 'movement whose stature and influence is growing daily in South Africa'. He also recalled the Lusaka talks which were '... open and conducted in a friendly spirit'.

Clearly Naidoo believes that it is possible to chart a line between workerism and populism, while retaining the political independence of COSATU. But not everyone believes that relations will proceed as smoothly as Naidoo suggested. In a long and informative interview Cyril Ramaphosa made it clear that he had doubts about the ease with which the unions could work with the UDF (in *Africa Report*, March-April 1986). He contrasted the democracy and accountability of the union movement with the populism of organisations like the UDF, which he accused of lacking the structure and coherence of the unions. Asked directly whether he was implying that the unions, because of their structure and accountability to their members, are in fact more democratic than movements such as the UDF, Ramaphosa replied: 'That's what we would say'.

This concern about the nature of the UDF is not new, and arises out of previous encounters between the unions and the organisation. For example, there were those who felt that during the highly successful November 1984 stayaway, the unions were effectively 'bounced' into certain decisions, without being able to refer them back to their members for ratification. This is not simply a reflection of the pace of events in a highly charged situation, but reflects the differences between the unions (with their clear lines of accountability back to their members) and the UDF (which is

a loose amalgam of hundreds of organisations, effectively led from above, with little room for consultation with its membership) (see De Villiers, 1986; contributions in *SALB*, 9, 2 (1983)).

But despite his doubts about the UDF, Ramaphosa is clear that the unions and the populist movements should work together. He believes however, that any joint initiative will have to be taken in what he calls a 'structured' manner, allowing the unions time to consult their members.

Ramaphosa also spoke about the relationship with the ANC. Asked whether the independence that the unions claimed for themselves was still an unresolved issue with the ANC, he replied:

I wouldn't say it was still unresolved. They know our position. It was made clear to them. We explained to them that we want to retain our independence. I think the ANC recognises COSATU as a major force in the struggle for liberation in this country and they respect that position.

COSATU AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN COMMUNIST PARTY

If the relationship between the ANC and COSATU appears to have been resolved, the same can not be said of the South African Communist Party (SACP). The communists see themselves as THE party of the South African working class. And this is a view apparently endorsed by the ANC, which referred to the SACP as representing the working class, having no interests separate from those of the working people.

This identification of the SACP with the working class, in the eyes of the ANC, was taken one step further during a broadcast from Radio Freedom - the radio station of the ANC broadcasting from exile. The broadcast was made on 2 December, one day after the founding of COSATU, and was the ANC's first response to the emergence of the new federation. The broadcast, after greeting the founding of COSATU as something to be welcomed 'with open arms', went on to discuss its potential role in the political struggle. The broadcast concluded that the SACP had long been the working class movement and that trade unions could not replace the party's direction and guidance.

This leads into a very much wider debate on the role of the unions and the communist party, which was partly covered by the article that I published in *ROAPE* before (Plaut, 1984). Certainly the SACP is clear about the role that it would like to see for itself. But what is the attitude of the unions? The question first arose publicly following the keynote address by Joe Foster, the general secretary of FOSATU at the federation's

conference, in 1982, and which was then adopted as FOSATU policy (see MacShane *et al*, 1984). In it Foster emphasised the need for independent working class politics, and suggested that the trade unions should form the basis of the new politics. Just how this should be done was not elaborated, but the theme generated considerable interest and controversy. Some went further, arguing that a new political party should be formed from the union movement, to reflect the views of the workers, which might otherwise be subsumed within the wider liberation movement.

The SACP was outraged for it directly challenged the party's *raison d'etre*. It accused FOSATU of attempting to supplant the SACP's right to speak on behalf of the working class. Since then the SACP has returned to the attack time and again, with at least four articles on the subject, attacking Foster and FOSATU by name, appearing in different issues of the party journal - *African Communist* - from 1984 to 1986. The debate has also emerged inside South Africa, with two conflicting articles appearing in the *South African Labour Bulletin* (see Erwin, 1985; Cronin, 1986).

What does all this debate and intellectual activity indicate? In part that there is a real concern within the labour movement in South Africa about the current struggles. How and on what terms should the unions relate to popular resistance, often led by mass movements, like the United Democratic Front? How can it consult and involve its members in these campaigns? How can the unions overcome the political division that exist amongst its members - some of whom follow black consciousness, some of whom back Buthelezi, and some of whom support the non-racial line of the UDF? But there are also questions about the longer term role of the unions within a free South Africa. Will the unions be allowed to continue the independence that they currently enjoy, or will they be brought under the direction of the state or perhaps the SACP? Will strikes be allowed? How will the unions influence state policy? The answers to these questions are still far from clear. But, for the present, they are in the background. The second state of emergency in recent years, declared on 12 June, has concentrated attention on the contest with the state. With such powerful pressure on it, COSATU, along with many other movements, is fighting for its future.

REFERENCES

- Cronin, J (1986) - 'The question of unity - a reply', in *SALB*, 11, 3.
De Villiers, R (1986) - 'UDF: front or political party?', in *WIP*, 40.
Erwin, A (1985) - 'The question of unity', in *SALB*, 11, 1.
Karese, C *et al* (1986) - *Directory of South African Trade Unions*

- (University of Cape Town, SALDRU).
- Labour Monitoring Group (1985) - 'The November stay-away', in *SALB*, 10, 6.
- Lambert, R (1980) - 'Political unionism in South Africa: a review of Felt's *Workers Without Weapons: SACTU and the organisation of African workers*' in *SALB*, 6, 2 & 3.
- Lewis, J and E Randall (1985) - 'Survey: the state of the unions', in *SALB*, 11, 2.
- MacShane, D, M Plaut and D Ward (1984) - *Power! Black workers, their unions and the struggle for freedom in South Africa* (Nottingham: Spokesman).
- Naidoo, J (1986) - 'The significance of COSATU', in *SALB*, 11, 5
- Plaut, M (1984) - 'Changing perspectives on South African trade unions', in *Review of African Political Economy*, 30.
- SALB* (11, 2) (1985) - 'COSATU launch'.
- SALB*(11, 5) (1986) - 'Document: ANC-SACTU-COSATU Talks'.

SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR BULLETIN

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING LABOUR JOURNAL

Articles, Reviews, Interviews, Reports

on

South Africa's contemporary labour situation

Subscribe: SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR BULLETIN

4 Melle House, 31 Melle Street, 2001 Braamfontein, South Africa

RATES FOR EIGHT ISSUES

	SOUTH AFRICA	OVERSEAS
Workers	R8,00	
Students	R20,00	\$20,00/£15,00
Salaried Individuals	R36,00	\$36,00/£25,00
Institutions	R100,00	\$75,00/£50,00
Companies	R200,00	\$150,00/£100,00 or equivalent