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# Towards an Assembly for Working Class Unity

After the seismic events of the Marikana massacre – the most significant political development in the post-Apartheid period – the turmoil in Cosatu marks a decisive turning point in the history of the federation with implications not just for Cosatu members, but for the wider working class.

by Weizmann Hamilton

The most powerful trade union federation the SA working class had ever created stands on the precipice of disintegration as the same time as there is a rising tide of militancy in the workplace, in townships and squatter camps as well as in tertiary education institutions. These struggles are demonstrating two seemingly contradictory phenomena. On the one hand a unity of purpose in all these major theatres of struggle as working class resistance is reaching – and in the case of the workplace surpassed in 2010 already – levels of struggle last seen at the height of the struggle against apartheid. At the same time on the other hand, the working class is disunited politically and organisationally.

## Struggles not united

Despite the fact that the demands of service delivery protestors around the country are the same, from Wedela in Gauteng to Siphaheni in the Eastern Cape, from Gselepe in Limpopo to Chaneng in the North West, there is no agreed set of demands, no common programme of action and no coordination of these struggles.

The same applies to the struggles of working class students across the country against financial and academic exclusion, unaffordable tuition fees and accommodation charges. The degeneration of the ANC, PAC and SACP has to one degree or another percolated into their student formations, reproducing their factions, leaving them rudderless, converting them into training academies for the new elite and political gatekeepers of the policies of their mother bodies. Consequently although student protests are now virtually part of the academic calendar, there is no common set of demands, no common programme of action and no coordination of these struggles.

In the workplace the same phenomenon is manifest. The

entire labour movement, irrespective of organisational, ideological or political affiliation, is united in its opposition to labour broking, e-tolling, rising fuel costs and the relentless increases in the costs of transport and basic commodities they trigger. There is agreement on the need for a national minimum wage and decent jobs. Yet there is no coordinated action on any of these.

## Centre of working class struggle is lost

Historically, in the absence of a workers party, the role of coordinating working class struggles has fallen to Cosatu. It has acted as the centre of working class resistance on fuel price increases, privatisation, Gear and labour broking. Today, however, Cosatu is paralysed, torn apart by the factional struggles which the Zuma-led ANC has actively promoted.

With Cosatu staring implosion in the face, we take no pleasure in the constitution of this perspective. The creation of Cosatu was the South African working class' greatest achievement. Ideologically Cosatu's embrace of socialism placed it head and shoulders above any other mass formations on both the trade union and political front anywhere in the world.

Unfortunately, the ideological confusion in the Cosatu leadership led to a futile attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable—the interests of Cosatu's working class membership and the capitalist interests represented by the ANC. Today Cosatu is divided into two politically hostile pro- and anti-Zuma camps. Unfortunately even the anti-Zuma camp, despite its more intransigent stance on nationalisation and the National Development Plan, which it correctly describes as the latest incarnation of Gear, is neither putting forward a clear socialist programme or strategy nor the need for a mass workers party.



Such is the level of disillusionment within Cosatu affiliates that workers are voting with their feet. The split at the top in Cosatu is superimposed on a fracturing taking place at the base. A number of affiliates irrespective of their allegiance, in both the pro- and anti-Zuma camps are experiencing splits with the emergence of new unions in both the private and public sectors. What began as a trickle with the emergence of Giwusa out of the Ceppawu, and the now defunct Ocgawu out of Numsa is turning into a flood as workers attempt to return to Cosatu's militant traditions outside the federation. The eviction of NUM from the platinum belt saw the formation of independent strike committees and the rise of AMCU. Out of Satawu has emerged the National Transport Movement basing itself on the original traditions of the militant Sarwhu. There are splits from Samwu, Poperu and Sadtu and a search for a way out by workers in Nehawu and those remaining in NUM and Numsa.

Compromised politically, Cosatu has surrendered also its class independence and abdicated its role as the organising, political and ideological centre of working class struggle. The federation is imploding precisely when the need for such a centre has never been greater. The working class is as united in purpose, determination and combativity as it is divided organisationally.

These developments are taking place just as the entire capitalist class is rallying behind the mining bosses who are planning a jobs bloodbath with as many as 250,000 jobs facing the axe over the next five years. In addition the bosses are stepping up their campaign to weaken the labour laws, defend labour broking and dismantle centralised bargaining. The government is pressing ahead with plans for a wage subsidy not just for youth but for all workers, as well as special

economic zones and e-tolling. In the meantime the government is piling on the misery on the working with relentless fuel price increases that have now reached record levels which the bosses in the rest of industry have had no hesitation in passing onto the working class in the form of higher food prices in a country where 12 million go to bed hungry at night.

## Witch-hunt in Cosatu

Although the government wants to curry favour with Cosatu by agreeing to certain of the federation's demands on labour broking and collective bargaining, not enough MP's could be bothered to turn up in parliament for the vote. At the same time the Zuma-led ANC is intensifying its attacks on Cosatu through the witch-hunt against Vavi, taking full advantage of the allegations of rape against him and his admission that he had sex in the workplace with a female subordinate whose job wasn't advertised. With no end in sight for the worst crisis in capitalism since the 1930s, the bosses will have no alternative but to step up the attacks on the working class and the pressure on the government to carry out their wishes. On the same time the very unions who denounce the NDP are taking no steps to form a new workers party. This fact and the limited resources of the Workers and Socialist Party leave room for new parties to be established like the EFF which also claims to speak in the interest of the working class.

It is vital that we take urgent steps to prepare for the escalation in the class war that is on the horizon. SA's capitalist ANC government is making the working class pay for the crisis of their masters' system. At some point the current policy of attacks by stealth – withdrawing from collective agreements to increase pay of particular categories of workers in the education and safety and security sectors for example – will be replaced

by an all-out attack involving possible wage freezes and retrenchments for public sector workers.

## A Programme of Action for Workers Unity

The DSM supports the call by the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP) for an Assembly for Working Class Unity at a date to be announced, for the reunification of working class struggle and the re-establishment of an ideological, political and organising centre of working class struggle.

The assembly should be attended by delegates from workplaces in and outside all federations and unions – the organised as well as the unorganised — student and working class communities and different socialist parties. Following the example of the mineworkers we call for the establishment of independent committees of struggle, linked together to unite the working class within each arena of struggle and across them around a common programme of action to:

- fight retrenchments on the mines through preparing a general strike and putting forward the demand for nationalisation of the mines under the democratic control and management of the working class
- set up committees of action linking motorists, taxi industry, commuters communities and trade unions to resist the implementation of fuel increases and e-tolling
- for these committees to link up with communities and students to demand service delivery and free education
- for a reduction in the working week without loss of pay and for the nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy under workers control and managements, for a socialist SA and a socialist world.



Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi