



Cosatu's mute response

Waves of social movement unionism in South Africa and its crisis during Covid

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Cosatu's failure to be the voice of the working class in times of crisis, such as during Covid-19 and the July 2021 unrest in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, reflects its inability to envision a future beyond the ANC, writes uMBUSO weNKOSI. He argues that as long as organised labour is locked in an alliance with the ruling party it cannot be rooted in community struggles, to the detriment of the social movement unionism of the anti-apartheid struggle.

Introduction



The history of the South African struggle to attain democracy is linked with the struggle of the working class for the right to organise in the workplace and have unions officially recognised. This struggle by organised labour, which was not limited to attaining rights in the workplace but was linked with the anti-apartheid community struggles, was characterised as social movement unionism (Webster, 1988). However, over the past decade, this link between unions and community/social movements has been declining. The Covid-19 pandemic and the various lockdown measures passed by the South African government in March 2020 exposed how organised labour has lost its links with the community struggles.

This article focuses on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and its affiliates. Cosatu has been chosen for two reasons. Firstly, it is the largest union federation with a membership of 1.8 million workers. Secondly, despite the many neoliberal policies adopted by the ANC, Cosatu is still part of the tripartite alliance, together with the South African Communist Party (SACP). Cosatu is of the view that through this alliance it can influence the governing party's policies. Yet, since the 2000s, Cosatu has become a junior partner in this alliance, working for the ANC and rescinding social movement unionism (Barchiesi, 2006; Buhlungu, 2010; Mosoetsa and Tshoaeidi, 2013). There has been a plethora of scholarly calls for a return to social movement unionism beyond Cosatu's alliance with the ANC or in other spaces where the community struggles continue (see Paret, 2015; Cherry, 2017; Mmadi, 2023).

This article aims to show that the Covid-19 pandemic further exposed how Cosatu lost its vision and its ability to link up with community struggles. The Covid-19 pandemic showed the depth of the crisis of social reproduction as many South Africans became unemployed and faced food insecurity and a looming crisis in the health sector. During this period, Cosatu did not have a clear response to the challenges faced by the South African working class and communities.

South Africa also experienced mayhem in July 2021, when looting broke out in parts of Durban and Gauteng. During this chaos, Cosatu was silent and did not offer any voice of reason.

This article argues that unions are struggling to find their identity – the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed this. I reconsider what is social movement unionism and focus on the ideological character, the drive of the community-labour alliances and the imagined future. Key to social movement unionism is that workers were not only mobilised around their identity as workers, but as part of the oppressed working class community, enforcing ideals of democratic rights and citizenship beyond the workplace struggles (Mosoetsa and Tshoaeidi, 2013).

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Social movement unionism and alliances with the community

From the 1970s, we saw the re-emergence of militant Black trade unions who established strong ties with communities in fighting the apartheid state (Ballard, Habib, Valodia, 2006; Webster, 1988). This resistance was to revive the political landscape as well, following harsh state repression in the 1960s. In 1973, over 100,000 Black workers in the cities of Durban and Pinetown embarked on a series of strikes in protest against low wages and poor working conditions (Webster, 1988). In 1976, the youth of Soweto, inspired by the ideology of Black Consciousness, took to the streets to reject Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in Black high schools (Magaziner, 2009). During this period in South Africa, and especially from the 1980s, we saw the rise of “social movement unionism” between trade unions and communities, a term drawn from trade unions in Brazil and South Korea (Webster, 1988; Seidman, 1994; Waterman, 1999).

Von Holdt (2003:147) argues that the analysis of social movement unionism has concentrated on the role of the union in community struggles and “the impact of community alliances on the union social structure...” Von Holdt (2003:147-148) says social movement unionism is a “complex and dynamic network of political, community and workplace struggles woven together by a discourse of national liberation struggle.” He (2002) also argues that by focusing on social movement unionism the literature fails to speak to the intra-dynamics within the alliances between communities and trade unions and questions of popular consciousness within the alliances are rarely investigated. There is no one unifying ideology relating to the future within social movement unionism, except that it is driven by left political ideas, seeks to overthrow an authoritarian state and values principles of participatory democracy linked with building strong community alliances. Within social movement unionism, one finds various Marxist activists (Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist), anarcho-syndicalists, Black Consciousness activists, Pan Africanists, etc. So ideologically these multiple ideologies differ in their imagination of the ‘future’.

At the ideological level, the period was influenced by the emergence of a “non-Soviet New Left Marxism” which was critical of the Stalinist approach which saw unions as merely transmission belts of the vanguard party (Pillay, 1996:331). The move towards Left politics beyond a Soviet influence has to be understood within the broader revisionist debates outside of South Africa in the United Kingdom, and within South African institutes of higher learning in the 1970s between the National Union of South African Students (Nusas) and

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the newly formed South African Students Organisation (Saso) which gave birth to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), which questioned what they called the irksome role of ‘white liberals’ who had come to shape and influence how Blacks responded to their subjugation (Ally and Ally, 2008).

The tenets of the BCM argued that only Blacks (by Blacks they referred to Indians, Coloureds and Africans as the oppressed groups in South Africa) could come up with the solution to fighting their own subjugation and the white liberals who directly and indirectly benefitted from apartheid. The BCM advanced that these white liberals needed to focus on their own communities and deal with questions of white supremacy amongst themselves (Biko, 2004, Ally and Ally, 2008; Friedman, 1987). The white liberals “accepted many of the Black students’ charges, but refused to watch the battle for change from the sidelines ...” (Friedman, 1987:42).

Students inspired by Marxist approaches (Marxist-Leninist, Trotskyist), the academic Rick Turner and anarcho-syndicalist ideas began developing independent trade unions that had strong ties with students and they viewed African communities and workers as important allies (Friedman, 1987; Van der Walt, 2023). This group emphasised ‘workers control’, participatory democracy and the empowerment of the African communities within the union structures (Webster, 1988, Baskin, 1991, Van der Walt, 2023). The BCM movement also established new unions, for example the Black Allied Workers’ Union (BAWU), which was formed in 1971 under the leadership of Drake Koka.

Because of the state’s repression of political movements such as the ANC and the unions that were associated with the ANC (such as the South African Congress of Trade Unions [Sactu]), the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Council (formed in 1974), a predecessor of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) formed in 1979, did not adopt explicit or radical alliances with exiled political movements. They feared repression would weaken shopfloor structures (Von Holdt, 2003). Buhlungu (2010) argues that to survive the state repression, unions that emerged after the Durban strikes drew heavily on the lived experiences of Black workers and their intellectual influences in their unions, cultural and religious groups, mutual-help clubs and societies (*stokvels*), school struggles, etc. In reference to the intellectual contribution towards the emergence of democratic unionism, he refers to university intellectuals who had formal education, party intellectuals (who had links with political parties), union-made intellectuals (who attained their experience through participating in unions) and grassroots intellectuals (borrowing the term “organic intellectuals” from Gramsci to refer to those who never had formal university training but attained knowledge through their participation in different struggles) (Buhlungu, 2010: 34-49; Bonnin, 1999).

Faced with intense resistance from the workplace and communities, the apartheid government passed reforms recommended by the Reikert and Wiehahn commissions of the late 1970s such as recognising the right of trade unions to exist and the right of urban Blacks to live in cities and towns (Swilling and Phillips, 1989). The apartheid government also tried to win over Indians and Coloureds by creating a tricameral parliament where they had their own Houses of Parliament.

On 20 August 1983, the United Democratic Front was formed in opposition to the narrow reforms; affiliates were drawn from across society, including community-based organisations, churches, football clubs, burial societies, etc. Cosatu was established on 1 December 1985, after four rounds of unity talks between unions opposed to apartheid and committed to a non-racial, non-sexist society. (This involved unions active in



Fosatu that eventually became part of Cosatu). Cosatu and the UDF aligned with the ANC, engaging in strikes and insurrection to make the country ungovernable. Cosatu's relationship with the ANC mirrors that of its predecessor, Sactu, which had an alliance with the ANC and the SACP (formerly known as the Communist Party of South Africa).

The complex nature of community-labour struggles in the 2000s

In 1994, democratic elections took place in South Africa and the ANC became the governing party. It presented the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) as its election campaign manifesto, to remedy the socio-economic ills created by the apartheid regime (Turok, 2008). The RDP was driven by ideas of growth through redistribution meaning that redress was needed first in order to boost economic growth in South Africa (Marais, 2001). However, in 1996, the ANC adopted the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) policy which was criticised by Cosatu and the SACP as a neoliberal policy (Turok, 2008).

In 1997, the Greater Johannesburg Municipal Council (GJMC) stated that the city of Johannesburg was facing a financial crisis which would affect the delivery of services and that the Gauteng provincial government needed to intervene (Naidoo, 2010). In 1999 "a 'Transformation Lekgotla', an ad-hoc, unelected administrative body composed by the chairperson and the deputy chairpersons of the GJMC and the MLCs [Metropolitan Local Councils] plus five co-opted councillors [was] established as a transitional political organ in charge of running the five councils as a single structure" (Barchiesi, 2006:18). The management team with the Transformation Lekgotla presented the iGoli 2002 plan to the Council and it was approved on 16 March 1999 (Barchiesi, 2006). The iGoli 2002 plan was based on the separation of services provided by the GJMC and was seen as a cost effective strategy to deal with the city's fiscal crisis (Barchiesi, 2006).

In 2000, Wits University and the GJMC co-hosted an international conference called 'Urban Futures' where prominent academics such as Immanuel Castells and Saskia Sassen presented papers on urban development. The conference also served the purpose of unveiling plans for restructuring the city via the iGoli 2002 plan and the university via the Wits 2001 plan. This conference was boycotted by the Wits University branch of the South African Students Congress (Sasco), the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) of the Johannesburg city council, the Johannesburg central branch of the SACP, Cosatu, the National Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu), the anti-iGoli Forum, and members of various ANC branches in and around Johannesburg (Naidoo, 2010; Buhlungu, 2006).

Buhlungu (2006:69) argues that "[U]p to that point, left-wing activists outside the tripartite alliance [which comprised the ANC, SACP, and Cosatu] were uncertain about how to proceed and were thus searching for political relevance in a context where left-wing ideas were no longer fashionable" and those within the tripartite alliance were frustrated by the ANC's adoption of Gear. The coming together of different activists, as Naidoo (2010) shows, was not merely about the recreation of Left ideas. It represented the multiple diverse responses to the neoliberal policy recommendations that had been adopted and promoted by the ANC government. These affected the communities, academics and trade unionists; recommendations such as labour market flexibility (also restructuring of the university) meant that workers would lose their jobs and unions their members. It also meant that a number of townships residents would not be able to pay for the commodified public services such as electricity and water. The coming together of the groups led to the formation of the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), on 6



July at Wits University, and in September that year the founding conference was held at Cosatu House.

Focusing on the APF as a case study, Buhlungu (2006) asks what is new about the 'new social movements'? He shows that in some cases, the 'new' tends to be exaggerated as the APF was formed by activists who had linkages with the tripartite alliance and included some people who had been expelled from the SACP or Cosatu. It also had links with Samwu for example, which was formed in 1987 as a result of a merger between the Cape Town Municipal Workers Association, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), and some community unions that had started in the 1980s (Barchiesi, 2006). Samwu's relations with the 'new social movements,' particularly the APF, as indicated, was a result of the opposition to the iGoli 2002 plan.

Samwu criticised municipal corporatisation, arguing that it posed a threat to working conditions and wages of the working class and would also exclude poor communities from accessing public services (Xali, 2005; Barchiesi, 2006). Barchiesi shows that the relationship between Samwu and the APF was short-lived, citing a strike called by Samwu on 30 November 2000 in protest against the Council's unilateral approach. The strike was suspended on 4 December 2000 because the union faced direct pressure from the ANC and Cosatu. Local government elections were about to be held and civil movements such as the South African National Civics Organisation (Sanco) had accepted the iGoli 2002 plan and were supporting the payment of services. Samwu capitulated to the pressure (Barchiesi, 2006; Zuern, 2006; Naidoo, 2010) because, despite its opposition to privatisation, following the intervention of Cosatu and the ANC some of its national leaders had begun to argue that the privatisation struggles could facilitate anti-government sentiment within the labour movement. The idea emerged within Samwu that the union had to break ties with the APF because it was 'anti-ANC' (Buhlungu, 2006).

The ANC perceived the movements as actively criminal and activists in these 'new movements' became victims of state repression (McKinley and Veriava, 2005). As movements outside the state, or, more accurately, outside the tripartite alliance and thus also in direct opposition to the fundamental developmental trajectory chosen by the ANC and the state it controlled, their tactics mostly included direct action (through strikes) and civil disobedience. For example, in cases where Eskom had disconnected communities from the electricity grid, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC) would 'illegally' reconnect them.

Naidoo (2010) shows that within the APF and its affiliates there was an internal struggle for power; those belonging to the Socialist Group sought to control the APF,

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which alienated the ‘ordinary’ members who were not Marxists or Trotskyites but simply wanted to find solutions to their problems. This competition within the movement, and its shift from horizontal democratic participation to a focus on seizing power at state or local municipality level, undermined the movement’s relevance in the communities. This also meant that the APF was now seen as a space for upward social mobility; struggles were seen as “...a transition, you do the struggles and then you move to positions” of power (Hlatshwayo, *interview* 19/03/2010).

What can be observed from this period is that the ideological shifts within the ANC, the emergence of new social movements and the limitations on the envisioned future highlighted the complex and contested nature of South Africa’s dynamics within social movement unionism. The shifts and alliances reflected an ongoing struggle to readdress the socio-economic disparities resulting from colonialism, slavery, segregation, and apartheid. At the same time, the challenges to reconcile various ideological and practical approaches in pursuit of social justice and economic transformation continued, but after the democratic transition and the demise of the oppressive state the tripartite party no longer shared the state as a common enemy. Cosatu, as indicated, has been accused of making the neoliberal policies palatable to the workers. This new role portrays the federation as working for the ANC and not for the workers and communities, effectively rescinding social movement unionism.

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Split and no alternative vision

Cosatu also failed to organise unorganised workers who are in the ‘informal’ economy. Another challenge was the Marikana massacre in 2012, which prompted the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), an affiliate of Cosatu at the time, to question its alliances with the ANC (Numsa, 2014). Gentle (2014) argues that the massacre exposed the fact that the ANC was no longer a “broad church”, but a party of the very rich, “...those whose interests must be defended, violently, if necessary. In so doing, it freed activists from any further illusions of transforming the ANC into the movement it was in the 1980s.” In its resolutions adopted at a Special National Congress on 16-20 December 2013, Numsa (2013) indicated it would not support the ANC in the 2014 national elections, but would try to form a united front which would link the struggles in the workplace with those of the community. The position taken by Numsa in questioning the role of trade unions within the alliance was not new. During the transition period, it had already started asking whether it should align with the ANC as the governing party of the state or form a new vehicle to represent workers’ interests (Baskin, 1991).

Numsa indicated that it would also try to organise across value chains including mining (Numsa, 2013; Ashman and Pons-Vignon, 2014). This was welcomed in a



statement released by nine Cosatu affiliates who argued that Numsa's move would help in organising workers in atypical employment, which offered a pragmatic way of dealing with the changing nature of the South African economy (Numsa, 2014). Ashman and Pons-Vignon (2014) have argued that the move to try to come up with a united front meant a rejuvenation of labour-community alliances and a shift in Numsa to dealing with community issues ranging from "housing to water and electricity distribution".

Numsa, which was the largest affiliate of Cosatu, was expelled from the federation in 2015, which led to the emergence of a new federation, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu) in 2017, led by Numsa. This split was not only about the failure of Cosatu to question its ideological relationship with a party like the ANC that was considered anti-working class. It also reflected a deep political tension about who would lead the working class in South Africa.

The pandemic and the crisis of social reproduction

At the beginning of 2020 the global capitalist system was showing signs of moving towards a major economic slump; economic growth was slowing in China, Japan was possibly facing a recession, emerging economies in the Global South such as Mexico, Argentina and South Africa were already in a recession (Rethink Africa, 2022). South Africa was already plagued by unemployment, poverty, inequality and gender-based violence.

On 15 March 2020 President Cyril Ramaphosa declared the Covid-19 State of Disaster which was followed by a three-week level five lockdown effective from 26 March 2020. The lockdown measures were non-medical interventions intended to restrict person-to-person contact to prevent the virus from spreading. The aim of the lockdown was also to help prepare the healthcare system for a looming surge of patients in need of hospital care (to provide relief to a national healthcare system which was already in a crisis). The decision-making processes which informed the 'tough' lockdown measures have had a detrimental impact on the country's economic and social relations. Saving lives became a priority of the strategy and livelihoods suffered as many industries that were not providing essential services had to close. It was even worse for those in precarious working conditions in the informal economy (Bezuidenhout, Bischoff, Tshoedi, 2023).

Early days of lockdown and Cosatu's response

During level five, Cosatu's response was to release statements calling for support for the government's measures to fight the virus (McKinley, 2020). Bischoff (2023) in her chapter on trade unions during Covid-19, shows how affiliates within Cosatu effectively communicated their needs regarding the shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the protection of those at the forefront of the pandemic, i.e. the nurses. Yet Cosatu and the federations that Bischoff studied failed to link up with other movements on the health care front. For example, the Gauteng Community Health Care Workers Forum exposed the government's response to the crisis as inadequate since it did not protect the community health care workers (CHWs) who did not have sufficient PPEs, although at the same time, the government argued that the CHWs play an essential role in the fight against the pandemic (McKinley, 2020; Hlatshwayo, 2020). The forum promoted the idea of permanent employment of CHWs. The same criticism of the government lockdown was expressed by the Reclaimers Organisation, who took the government to court on 7 April to have their duties recognised as essential services. They



lost the case, but they were able to highlight how the government's interpretation of essential services was biased towards the formal economy (Krige, 2020).

While all of these struggles were happening there was also the formation of the C19 People's Coalition comprising various social movements. One of the issues it has taken up is the promotion of the Basic Income Grant (BIG), indicating the inadequacy of the social security measures provided by the government. The C19 People's Coalition has been at the forefront of the campaign to show that the Covid-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant – introduced in May 2020 for the unemployed – was not sufficient to mitigate the crisis of social reproduction in the country. The campaigns by the C19

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People's Coalition for BIG build on debates that had occurred within Cosatu in the 2000s around the importance of the BIG. Yet, the federation is nowhere to be seen within this coalition and has not engaged in the struggle for BIG with these new social movements that have been dealing with questions that affected the working class during the pandemic.

Community health care workers and the July 2021 unrest

Hlatshwayo (2018) shows that 70,000 health care workers are women and in times of a pandemic, as other scholars have demonstrated, it is women who are most affected because of their “their principal role as caregivers within families and front-line health-care workers” (Parry and Gordon, 2020). CHWs are a good example of social movement unionism since their workplace is their community as well. They perform double care, at the community level as well as at home (Hlatshwayo, 2020). Thus, their role as front-line agents is important in life-making work, i.e.

“cleaning, feeding, cooking, washing clothes ... public transport, nursing work, garbage removal, food production” (Bhattacharya, 2020). Life-making work became known as essential services during the lockdown, and I have argued that in some cases essential work was ignored by unions.

From 25-26 November 2020 one of Cosatu's affiliates, Nehawu, went on strike to put pressure on the government to employ 20,000 CHWs. This move by the affiliate has been praised as it has taken up the necessary community struggles – especially the neglected issue of CHWs – who are mostly women. Hlatshwayo (2020:48) argues that “[p]aradoxically, the pandemic, which destroyed lives and the economy, presented CHWs with the rare opportunity to intensify their struggles for permanent employment and better wages.” Interestingly, this fight for CHWs also saw Nehawu (2020) attacking the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers (Nupsaw) in a press statement as a fly-by-night union. Yet Nupsaw and non-profit organisation Masincedane were part of a protest in September 2020 in Cape Town for making CHW permanent workers and calling for all provinces to do the same (Hlatshwayo, 2020). The tension between Nupsaw and Nehawu revolved around who would lead this fight, with Nupsaw



questioning the intentions of Nehawu and the latter arguing that they have a 33-year-old “history of fighting for workers against exploitation and we will continue to champion workers interests at all material times” (Nehawu, 2020). This was telling since it suggested Nehawu saw itself as a de facto leader because of its history instead of its partnership in a new alliance. This is a challenge that many affiliates of Cosatu have faced; it is difficult for them to let ‘newcomers’ take the wheel while they have been leading in society for longer (Barchiesi, 2006).

Another challenge emerged in the country with the unrest from 8-17 July 2021 in Gauteng and Durban. The impetus for this unrest was the arrest of former president Jacob Zuma after being sentenced to 15 months of imprisonment for not appearing before the judicial commission of inquiry into allegations of state capture led by Chief Justice Raymond Zondo. As a result of the unrest, looting and destruction of private property, 354 people died and R50 billion was lost to the economy. The July 2021 mayhem revealed a crisis of leadership; a working class that adopts a short-sighted outlook employed by the political elite. A looting working class does not indicate a sustained collective consciousness because, after the looting, its problems remain. Cosatu was not present in these urban communities during the unrest to provide a voice of reason or even in the process of reconstruction and cleaning up the mess that followed. It did not address the issues behind the looting – that most people in the communities were faced with hunger resulting from the strict Covid-19 regulations. Much more telling is that in the *Report of the expert panel into the July 2021 civil unrest* trade unions are mentioned as key stakeholders, yet there is nothing in the report about the position of Cosatu or any other trade unions. The report refers only to Gauteng’s Premier David Makhura who engaged with hostel dwellers, *izinduna* (traditional authority), taxi associations and political parties to stand against the violence (Africa, Gumbi and Sokupa, 2021).

Conclusion

The argument raised in this paper is that to assess social movement unionism there is a need to understand its ideological character, the union’s engagement with the community and the imagination of the alternative future. The ideological character of Cosatu from the 2000s has been about criticising from the position of the Left yet failing to carry through this criticism by substantially linking up with the communities to oppose the policies adopted by the ANC. This is because Cosatu fails to see a future beyond the ANC. Instead Cosatu sees a future where its former leaders like Bheki Ntshalintshali argue that Cosatu is not present in the streets but “in the boardroom we have sound policies that cannot be refuted” (AmaShabala, 2022). The article indicates that during the Covid-19 pandemic and its various lockdowns there was a gap where there should have been a linking up with the community struggles, and the federation did not move into that vacuum. Similarly, during the 2021 July unrest the federation was mute.

The desire for the return of social movement unionism in scholarly articles (see Paret, 2015; Cherry, 2017; Madi, 2023) fails to assess the ideological character of the present relationship in which unions are subsumed by the vision of themselves as partners, albeit in an alliance that treats them as junior partners. **NA92**



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