Cosatu's changing face

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A PARADOX OF VICTORY by Sakhele Buhlungu
(University of KwaZulu-Natal Press)

This is an engaging and provocative book by one of South Africa's foremost labour analysts — informed, authoritative and refreshingly free of socio-logical jargon, group-think and ideological rigidity.

Buhlungu makes it clear in his preface that he does not see himself as a cheerleader for labour. He is surely right to argue that labour studies "have often engaged in a kind of morality play whereby researchers felt they had to support the labour movement... The result is that many in the movement have come to expect sympathetic treatment... even when there is overwhelming evidence pointing to problems and contradictions."

At the same time, one cannot help feeling that he overstates the case and that his lament on Cosatu's alleged decline since 1994 has been skewed by rose-tinted memories of his own experience as a union organiser during the extraordinary upheavals of the 1980s.

The activists of the Mass Democratic Movement era were indeed driven, far more than now, by an ethic of democratic collectivism and self-sacrifice. Every left-leaning person who lived through those years was indelibly marked by them.

But history suggests that such revolution-ary virtues are strictly temporary. Are they a fair and realistic standard of comparison?

Buhlungu's book revolves around this polarity. The "victory" of the title is Cosatu's remarkable rise to power in the late 1980s and early 1990s, symbolised by the iconic image of miners' boss Cyril Ramaphosa leading Nelson Mandela from jail and later by the federation's shaping influence on the Reconstruction and Development Programme and radical labour reforms under Nelson Mandela's government.

The "paradox". Buhlungu argues, is its subsequent loss of organisational muscle and influence — a direct consequence of the political and economic freedoms it fought so hard to secure. South Africa's reintegration into a liberalising world economy has brought job loss and shifts to casual labour, paring down Cosatu's membership, while the ethic of solidarity and selfless service has been eroded by personal ambition and greed.

Buhlungu starts by tracing the roots of the federation in an effort to explain how, after false starts in the 1920s, 1940s and 1950s-1960s, the project not only survived but hardened into the organisational backbone of the liberation movement.

He describes how, after the 1973 strike wave and subsequent membership collapse, the new unions focused on building robust, factory-based structures with accountable leadership. Survival, he argues, was the imperative. Worker democracy made it harder for the state and employers to cripple organisations by picking off leading lights.

Buhlungu rightly emphasises the neglected role of Young Christian Workers and other church movements, and such non-labour influences as tribal councils and burial societies, in the post-1973 resurgence.

But his bald claim that unions faced the dual scourge of "state repression and employer victimisation" masks an important reality: from the late 1970s enlightened employers played a vital role in shielding fledgling unions from the apartheid state.

Perhaps the most compelling part of the book is its account of the changing character of Cosatu, backed by surveys that suggest members are getting older, more skilled and better educated. In 2004 92% were on full-time permanent contracts.

"There is no escaping the fact that the federation represents a diminishing section of the working class and that it has become structurally impossible for trade unions to represent the interests of the unemployed, casual workers, contract workers and others engaged in various forms of precarious employment," Buhlungu writes.

The implication is that Cosatu paradoxically ushered in the labour-market restructuring that is sapping its strength.

One problem with this is the unconvincing chronology — in the metal industries, for example, large-scale job losses started much earlier, in the early 1980s. But the major objection is: What is Cosatu supposed to do that it is not already attempting through national campaigns?

Casualisation and job cuts are enormously hard to fight because the basic union weapon, the strike, is of limited use when employers are shedding labour. In this context, Buhlungu's call for the battle to be taken to the factory floor seems utopian.

His stricture that industrial unionism is increasingly helpless in the face of labour-market tectonics may be equally valid, but again, how is the federation to react? What is the mysterious new form of labour organisation he apparently favours as an alternative?

Given that unions now operate in a more normal society, it seems perverse to lament the emergence of career unionism, the fact that unionists now have a wide array of job options — or, indeed, their failure to uphold "radical notions of smashing the state and capitalism."

And, although it is probably true that Cosatu is now more centralised and hierarchical than in the heady 1980s and its leaders more elitist and upwardly mobile, that does not necessarily support the claim that its power is on the wane.

The real paradox may be the persistence of its militant traditions, despite the patterns Buhlungu describes.

His assertion that Cosatu is being "de-radicalised" is not borne out by high and rising levels of strike activity. As he himself points out, general strikes were staged every year between 2000 and 2004, often in tandem with protest marches. This is the movement that just two years ago effectively installed Jacob Zuma as ANC leader and which, he notes, has been described as "the elephant in the room" in the ruling party.

Its continued independence from the ANC — which Buhlungu also concedes, despite suggesting that it should withdraw from the alliance — was recently highlighted by its general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi's public attack on Cabinet graft.

Cosatu sometimes uses its power in backward-looking and quixotic ways and in grappling with harah new trends in the global economy often seems theoretically at sea.

But it remains an authentic mouthpiece of ordinary people and, given all the forces at work in South Africa, broadly a force for good. It should not be expected to reproduce the kind of activism for which, in the South Africa of 2010, conditions no longer exist.