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Social Movement Trade Unionism: Case of the Congress of South African Trade Unions

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ABSTRACT  This paper discusses the utilisation of social movement trade unionism by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in seeking to influence the government to pursue policies that improve the lives of workers in South Africa. Social movement unionism involves trade union movement struggles characterised by shop-floor participatory processes, broader socio-political struggles and trade union alliances with community and political organisations. This perspective transcends economistic trade union struggles that are limited to the workplace. As a social movement union, COSATU played a critical role in contributing to social change by demanding the abolition of apartheid; rolling back of neoliberal economic policies in post-apartheid South Africa and, today, continues to be a key player in representing workers. However, COSATU social movement influence in the post-apartheid era has been affected by its adoption of alliance politics, utilisation of formal structures of incorporation such as the National Economic Development and Labour Council, intra-union conflicts and the reduction of its historical militant approach, among other challenges.

Introduction

This paper discusses Congress of South African Trade Unions’s (COSATU) adoption of social movement unionism in representing the needs of workers, its successes and prevailing challenges. The trade union social movement perspective refers to labour movements that develop a socio-political character, and concern themselves not only with workplace issues (pay and terms and conditions) but with broader social and political issues such as human rights, social justice and democracy (Bezuidenhout 2000; Yu 2013). COSATU unionism goes beyond the workplace as it actively seeks to influence both the state and the employer in order to advance the welfare of the workers. In this context social movement unionism theory contends that trade unions are not separate from social movements such as faith groups, civic, advocacy, campaign, welfare and residents’ organisations and student groups (Carola, Heery, and Turner 2004). These
engage in political activism and form broader coalitions for economic and social justice. Social movements are a set of opinions and beliefs that represent preferences for changing some elements of the social and/or reward distribution of a society that normally manifest themselves through social movement organisations (McCarthy and Zald 2001; Tilly 2004).

This study adopts social movement unionism theory to explain the basis of COSATU’s collective action in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. This is premised on the argument that COSATU sensed the limitations of workplace-based workers’ struggles and went beyond this level, to participation in the broader socio-political arena. Social movement unionism is based on the view that workplace relations are shaped by the structures of state power (Ross 2008). Therefore, COSATU’s argument is that the destiny of the workers is affected by the political and policy contexts in which they work.

This paper is organised as follows; by way of a background to social movement trade unionism in South Africa, the study identifies the circumstances that influenced this form of unionism. The second section conceptualises social movement unionism and locates COSATU within this realm. Following this, the paper proceeds to discuss COSATU’s social movement trade unionism in both apartheid and post-apartheid eras and finally discusses the challenges and postulates the future of COSATU social movement unionism in South Africa.

The background to COSATU social movement unionism in South Africa

The COSATU social movement trade unionism in South Africa originated from a political landscape that denied workers a living wage and their various employment rights (such as collective bargaining, joining trade unions, changing employers and freedom of movement). The roots of this landscape are in colonialism and the 1948 apartheid system. In particular, the apartheid system reinforced discrimination of the majority of the workers. The laws (such as the Industrial Conciliation Act) and institutions of apartheid (such as the constitution) systematically removed all workplace and constitutional protection from the black labour force. Consequently, legislated racial exclusion and politics informed perspectives on poverty among the different races and classes (Magasela 2005).

Growing resentment with a governance system that encouraged race-based poor wages brought instabilities in the workplace (strikes for higher pay; absenteeism, fanning sickness, desertion) (Austin 1975). This led to trade union growth, resulting in the formation of some of the most vibrant trade unions on the South African socio-political landscape that produced landmark collective actions (Baskin 1991). In the late 1800s and early 1900s workers’ discontent among blacks (including Indian and Coloured workers) was confined to the workplace as businesses rejected any form of collective bargaining (Visser 2003). Further, early formal trade unions were representing white employees only as blacks were not allowed to unionise. The later emergence of black trade unionism can be ascribed to lessons that the black workers drew from the white organised labour.
The International Centre for Trade Union Rights (ICTUR 2005) highlights the chronology of the early growth of black trade unionism by pointing out that in 1917, the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) became the first union to organise black workers. IWA merged into the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union of Africa (ICU) in 1919. The South African Trades and Labour Council, initially a ‘whites’-only trade union, began to accept black trade union affiliates in the 1930s though it never picketed employers in support of black workers’ demands. While most trade union struggles were directly against the employer (e.g. the 1914 railway workers strike, the 1919 African miners’ strike and the 1922 Rand miners’ strike), the government still intervened in these workplace struggles and in most circumstances, workers striking over meagre wages and poor working conditions were violently dispersed or killed by state security machinery. The state also introduced draconian laws such as the Martial Law, Riotous Assemblies Act and the War Measure No. 1425 of 1941 to kill, deport or forcibly drive striking workers back to work in 1914, 1919, 1922, 1931 and 1943 (Visser 2003). Martial Law, usually a wartime measure, enabled the military and police to put down strikes. War Measure No. 1425 (1941) and the Riotous Assemblies Act banned gatherings of more than 20 people on mining property without permission. This seems to have made black union leadership realise that they needed collaboration with other movements to fight the unjust state system that facilitated the payment of paltry remunerations in the workplace, thereby beginning to adopt social movement unionism.

Early signs of this collaboration emerged through political trade unionism in 1946 when the Council of Non-European Trade Unions, formed in 1941, collaborated with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) to push for the African Mine Workers’ Strike of that year to become a general strike (Maharaj 2008). Political unionism refers to trade union involvement in party politics and a deliberate effort to support a particular political party (Chun and Williams 2013). This collaboration seems to have benefitted from the fact that the then President of the African Mine Workers Union, J. B. Marks, was also a leader of the SACP. However, the strike was forcibly suppressed by brutal police tactics as the National Party marched into power, declaring Apartheid in 1948 (South African Democratic Teachers Union 2014). Apartheid was a legislated and institutionalised form of racial discrimination in all aspects of social life under Afrikaner minority rule. This exacerbated the problem of racially determined incomes that further infuriated the majority black workers.

Black trade unionism moved deeper into the political arena following the formation of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) in 1955. SACTU is well known for its successful strikes in the metal industry, manufacturing sector, agriculture, and mining, bus boycotts and stay homes across South Africa as well as forging links with liberation movements and other international trade union organisations (Meli 1989). SACTU allied with the ANC, South African Indian Congress, South African Coloured People’s Congress and the South African Congress of Democrats to form a Congress Alliance (Suttner 2003).
In view of the nature of the political opportunity structure of its time, SACTU argued that

(its) concerns included not only factory floor issues but also township living conditions and the overriding problem of state power . . . (for) a mere struggle for the economic rights of workers without participation in the general struggle for political emancipation would condemn the trade union movement to uselessness and to a betrayal of the interests of workers. (Sithole and Ndlovu 2007, 193)

The Congress Alliance organised a Congress of the People, a conference which presented demands for the kind of South Africa the majority of people wanted to live in. The Freedom Charter (1955) demanded democracy, land redistribution, houses, work, security and free and equal education. The Charter became a common platform between SACTU and liberation movements. The apartheid government declared this an unpalatable communist document which resulted in the arrest of the Congress leadership (Maharaj 2008).

This participation signalled that the labour movement recognised that the wage system in place was in fact sustained by the existing segregatory political system. It recognised that changing the political system could be a panacea to gaining workplace rights and better living conditions. It therefore decided to move beyond the workplace to fight for a democratic political system. SACTU also forged links with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions and the World Federation of Trade Unions.

In response, the state instituted pieces of legislation that further suppressed the workers (such as the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 and the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956) or introduced mere window-dressing amendments (such as the South Africa Constitution Acts of 1961 and 1983). The Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953 and the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1956 controlled workers unions, promoted racial division in trade unions and removed black workers’ trade unions from official recognition. Pursuant to these draconian pieces of legislation and continued repression, many SACTU leaders were arrested and it eventually went underground in 1960, leading to a lull in trade union activity until 1973 (Chauke 2008). As a result the rise of social unionism was interrupted. Some commentators however argued that SACTU failed because it abandoned its core business of making economic demands on employers (Feit 1975). Other authorities also felt that SACTU was a captive of the nationalist movement due to its participation in the Congress Alliance (Sithole 2007).

After SACTU was forced underground, a series of factory-based strikes occurred culminating in the famous 1973 Durban Strikes that saw workers’ wages in some instances being increased by up to 17% (Sithole 2007). Given that these strikes were economistic (workplace focus) and at factory level or led by specific industrial unions, they appeared to vindicate the arguments against SACTU’s political movement unionism. However, the Durban Strikes still set the tone for federation trade union revival following the retreat of SACTU, albeit an economistic (or workerist) federation.
This resulted in the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) on 20 April 1979. FOSATU was a mainly black national federation which emphasised engaging employers at the point of production (NUMSA 2009). NUMSA (2009) points out that FOSATU resisted affiliation with political parties and community groups due to the repressive political environment of its time. According to Friedman (1987), FOSATU unions argued that political participation would divert their energies from factory struggles and workers had different interests to other black groups and could not pursue them in political alliance with non-workers. Consequently, FOSATU refused to join the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983. The UDF was an anti-apartheid coalition of about 400 civic, church, students, workers and other organisations (local and regional) which promoted rent boycotts, school protests, worker stay-away and a boycott of the tri-cameral system (Suttner 2004). The federation therefore only exercised shop-floor militancy. FOSATU however successfully built a shop-floor democratic tradition and made significant inroads in bringing production to a standstill at crucial moments (Friedman 2011).

However, by the early to mid-1980s, many of the unions involved in the 1973 strikes that stayed away from joining FOSATU were questioning its arms-length relation to politics as they favoured a more social union approach (Visser 2003). Therefore, the seeds of social movement unionism that had been initiated by SACTU’s political unionism in the 1950s continued to simmer among a large number of trade union groups (mainly community based) that did not join FOSATU. According to Sithole (2007, 230–231), these trade unions ‘were more focused on direct involvement in broader political struggles than those that came together to form FOSATU. They stressed the inseparability of the shop-floor struggles from broader political campaigns against apartheid’. These included the South African Allied Workers’ Union, the Motor Assemblies and Components Union of South Africa (MACWUSA) and the General Allied Workers Union. Unions favouring a social movement approach generally had either worked with SACTU before it went underground or had maintained links with its exiled leadership (Kraak 1993).

The continued existence of both economistic (workerist) and social movement ideas within the trade union movement culminated in negotiations to establish a broad-focused trade union federation. This federation would utilise a social movement approach that incorporated workerist principles. A series of negotiations led to the dissolution of FOSATU and the establishment of a full-fledged social movement trade union, the COSATU in 1985. COSATU emerged as a leading challenger of workplace exploitation and apartheid rule.

**Social movement unionism theory**

Social movements are large-scale informal groups of individuals and/or organisations, sharing collective interest and the same side in socio-political, economic and/or cultural conflicts that bring together people, resources and ideas in a wider ecosystem of political activism to effect social change (Mario 1992). In
this context a trade union qualifies to be a social movement trade union if it ‘combines conventional institutionalised collective bargaining with modes of collective action and alliances typically associated with social movements’ (Hirschsohn 1998, 633). In other words the concept of social movement unionism recognises that trade union activity has two dimensions, one economic, the other social and political (Calenzo 2009).

Social movement trade unionism is a contemporary perspective that seeks to account for the tendency by trade unions in developing countries such as South Africa and Brazil to move beyond confining themselves to the struggle for workplace wage and working conditions to broader social, political and economic issues (such as human rights, social justice, democracy) (Chun and Williams 2013). Such action has largely been influenced by either exploitative systems of governance or the vagaries of neoliberal economics. Lambert and Webster (1998, 20) define social movement unionism as ‘a form of union organisation that facilitates an active engagement in factory-based, production politics and in community and state power issues’.

In this regard, social movement unionism has also been defined as a highly mobilised form of unionism usually acting in opposition to repressive political regimes and exploitative workplaces in newly industrialising countries of the developing world (von Holdt 2003). Adherents of this form of unionism believe that workers are also citizens and thus have interests in public policies that shape the distribution of rights, entitlements and responsibilities as well as issues of general economic and social equality (Ross 2008). They align with other components of civil society (such as women, students and community groups) to advance their common agenda (Calenzo 2009).

Pioneers of the social movement perspective such as Lambert and Webster (1988) effectively popularised it as they sought to explain the new forms of trade unionism in countries such as South Africa and Brazil. In these countries union struggles exemplified the broader political struggles by social movements during the third wave of democratisation in response to governance failures. Other authorities term these ‘Militant labour movements’ and note that they have also emerged in response to globalisation (Seidman 1994).

In the context of von Holdt’s (2003) and Lambert and Webster’s (1998) definitions, the trade union social movement perspective identifies four key strategies used by trade unions (Aganon, Serrano, and Certeza 2009). First, trade union social movements have a local focus and base and their power is based on the mobilisation of the so-called rank and file. Second, their practices are associated with collective actions that go beyond the regular workplace bargaining mechanisms to the social, political and economic spheres. Third, social movement trade unions build solidarity alliances and coalitions with other unions as well as other social movement groups in the community and beyond who have similar interests and problems. To this, political parties are normally added. However, if a union only allies with a particular political party, then it becomes a political union. Finally and more importantly social movement unions frame their demands around state governance issues and formulate transformative visions.
This is the premise within which COSATU social movement unionism is analysed. Its focus in both the apartheid and post-apartheid eras challenged mainstream industrial relations and labour movement theories (Hirschsohn 1998).

**COSATU social movement trade unionism in the apartheid era**

The 1973 Durban strikes that renewed trade union activity in the country seem to have been instrumental in facilitating the establishment of a social movement trade union. This is because these strikes and those that consistently featured in the following five years (some from newly formed unions) resulted in the state setting up the Wiehahn Commission in 1977 to investigate how to regulate labour legislation. Among its 1979 recommendations, the Wiehahn Commission stated that Government should recognise black trade unions and encourage them to register. This facilitated the registration of FOSATU.

However in the first half of the 1980s, three trade-union traditions dominated the South African scene (Barrett and Mullins 1990). The first tradition, perpetuated by the Federation of South African Trade Union (FOSATU), focused on workplace bread and butter unionism. It actively sought to avoid political involvement. This union approach has been referred to by other numerous names such as workerism, economistic or business unionism (Hirschsohn 1998). At this time however unions questioned FOSATU’s active pursuit of a cordial working relationship with the apartheid political establishment. The second tradition pursued by the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) centred on black consciousness movement and emphasised blackness as a common bond to its membership. The third tradition sought to continue the legacy of SACTU. COSATU emerged in December 1985 with this tradition – a tradition which ‘argued that labour had an obligation to address socio-economic issues because workers’ struggles in the factories and townships were indivisible’ (Barrett and Mullins 1990, 26). In fact the name ‘Congress of South African Trade Unions’ was coined to reflect the historic ‘Congress’ links between the ANC and SACTU.

As a result COSATU adopted social movement trade unionism rather than confining itself to workplace issues. The need for workers to partake in such a movement was aptly summed up by Mr Terror Lekota, then an organiser in the General Workers Union, who pointed out that workers needed to involve themselves in community struggles because

The struggle of the working class does not end at the factory floor. When workers who face management leave the factory they come up against the problems of high transport costs, rents and inadequate community facilities, all of which eat into their wages. To strengthen the community organisations is to improve the conditions of the working class; to fight high rents and bus fares is to fight the struggle of the working class. Unions must take up community struggles if they are to represent the interests of workers. (Historical Papers 2012, 4)
COSATU aligned with the ANC and the SACP. It also engaged in labour-community campaigns at the local and national levels. COSATU also waged socio-political struggles together with the UDF in a loose coalition – the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) to challenge the structural provisions of the apartheid political system and the pro-ANC UDF drew membership from the students, women, churches, workers and other community groups (Spector 2013).

Straddling the workplace and national politics COSATU pushed for the overthrow of the segregatory minority political system that impoverished the working majority. Its formation was followed by a wave of strikes. The year 1985, for example, saw the highest number of strikes in at least 10 years and by 1987 the number of strikes had approximately risen to 1148 (Baskin 1991). COSATU demanded better wages, abolition of segregation-based wages and working conditions in every industry and sector through militant action (Hlanganani Basebenzi 2005). Incessant COSATU protests, demonstrations and condemnations that often paralysed the economy made COSATU social movement trade unionism central to the democratisation process in South Africa.

Due to its social movement character and its quest to overthrow the existing political structure, COSATU also allied with the UDF and the National Education Crisis Committee to embark on a two-day stay-away on 5 and 6 May 1987, protesting against the white-only general election on 6 May (Narismulu 1998). In response, the apartheid government increased repression in a bid to contain labour’s participation in politics but could not stop it (Barrett and Mullins 1990).

In 1991 the apartheid government attempted to restructure the tax system by introducing Value Added Tax (VAT) on basic foodstuff, health care and other essential services. COSATU embarked on an anti-VAT campaign arguing that VAT should not be introduced on basic commodities. COSATU won its demand that basic foods be zero-rated, that is, be exempted from taxation, and VAT was also in general reduced from 13% to 10% (Seftel 1995). Further to this, apart from winning these short-term demands, COSATU established labour’s right to have a say on macroeconomic issues. COSATU continued to fight for a democratic South Africa, which it argued should be characterised by a ‘high wage, low cost economy’ or economic growth that takes place in the context of a redistributive strategy (COSATU 2014a).

In 1993 COSATU initiated a Reconstruction Accord later to emerge as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) in the ANC’s election manifesto and first government as it argued that it would support and campaign for the ANC in the 1994 elections if the liberation movement committed itself to this pact (Marais 2011). It believed that the RDP would promote more equitable incomes and ownership (Jauch 2003). The RDP proposed growth and development through reconstruction and redistribution. It argued for a living wage as a prerequisite for achieving the required level of economic growth.
COSATU social movement trade unionism in the post-apartheid era

In the post-liberation era, COSATU has played roles of differing magnitudes in influencing the ANC and government. When COSATU backed the ANC in the 1994 elections, it posited that it backed a government that would locate the needs of the working class at the centre of its development policy and the ANC had such credentials given its liberation struggle history. Some COSATU leaders went on to become ANC Members of Parliament, Cabinet Ministers, government officials, provincial premiers and ministers, and local government leaders and officials as a way of wedging influence on party and government policy (Visser 2007).

Through the RDP vehicle whose origins have been traced to COSATU, South Africa made significant redistributive strides in the areas of public sector employment, minimum wage adjustments and provisions of basic services such as water and sanitation, electricity and housing (Reitzes 2009).

COSATU also played a significant role in shaping South Africa as a constitutional democracy. It participated in constitution-making processes with the aim of ensuring that people were at the centre of governance (COSATU 2001). In the constitution, labour secured high concessions. These included non-discrimination in the workplace, right to fair labour practices, right to form, join and participate in union activities, right to strike and right to collective bargaining (South Africa Constitution 1996).

COSATU contributed to the crafting of the Labour Relations Act (1995). The Act strengthens the organisational rights of workers, protects workers in legal strikes, promotes collective bargaining, curtails arbitrary action by employers and gives workers a right to take solidarity action. The Act also recognises all workers including historically excluded public service workers and farm and domestic workers. The Labour Relations Act (1995) is touted as ‘one of the most progressive labour regimes in the world’ (Ranchod 2007). In conjunction with the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), this gain supports COSATU’s quest for social justice issues affecting workers.

In addition, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act also accords employees’ right to annual leave, sick leave and maternity leave. It introduced a 45-hour working week and details the rate of pay for overtime and public-holiday work. Its aim is to impose minimum conditions of employment on employers and to protect employees from malpractice by employers. This Act also encourages designated employers to implement affirmative action measures (Employment Equity) for previously disadvantaged groups. The Act prohibits unfair discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, women and people with disabilities. On a further note, the Act created a framework to address income inequality. However income inequality continues to increase though its face no longer solemnly has racial overtones (Leibbrandt, Wegner, and Finn 2011).

Pursuant to COSATU demands to participate in public policy processes, a tripartite statutory body, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) was established in 1995 with the objective of facilitating and
encouraging social dialogue between labour, business, community and government. NEDLAC offered labour opportunity to have a say in national policy issues and to exert influence on policy position outcomes (Mosoetsa and Tshoaedi 2013). However, critics of NEDLAC argue that it has not facilitated radical reforms or met COSATU expectations as it has not provided the labour body with space to influence macroeconomic policy (Gostner and Joffe 1998). The imposition of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy is often given as an example.

In 1996, the ANC government replaced the RDP with GEAR which promised to reduce poverty and inequality via a surge in economic growth – neoliberal economics. It presented a link between lower budget deficits and increased private sector investment and warned against the dangers of fiscal expansion.

COSATU tenaciously fought against the implementation of most of the tenets of GEAR. It argued that a more developed, democratic and equitable economy and society in the context of sustained growth as espoused by GEAR reinforced the very same socio-economic conditions of apartheid (Peet 2002).

COSATU’s fears were founded as implementation of GEAR coincided with public policies such as privatisation, retrenchments and commodification of traditional public goods (such as water and electricity) which militated against the majority of workers that COSATU represented as poverty, unemployment and inequality all increased among the working class (Edigheji 2007). GEAR also introduced forms of insecure work such as the informal sector, subcontracting, labour broking, outsourcing and casual contracts (Webster et al. 2008).

Policy problems such as those presented by GEAR meant that if COSATU retreated to the workplace and shed off its social movement character, no one would best defend the workers at national policy levels. Thus pursuing social movement unionism during the GEAR era saw COSATU fighting against neoliberal policies that appeared to impose economic difficulties on the workers. In response to rising levels of unemployment and poverty, COSATU launched a Jobs and Poverty Campaign in 1999. In coalition with a broad array of social movement groups it managed to bring out the numbers for marches, demonstrations, petitions and five national strikes, forcing the government and the employers into two jobs and poverty summits (COSATU 2006a; Hassen 2012). Closely linked to this campaign COSATU and its affiliates led a record number of protracted living wage battles, some of which went on for many months before employers were forced to negotiate a settlement (COSATU 2006b).

The workers’ federation also condemned and vehemently opposed the broad state privatisation programme under GEAR. Under increasing GEAR reforms, retrenchments, casualisation and increases in basic prices appeared to increasingly affect the workers (Edigheji 2007). COSATU and other social movements held rallies and took to the streets nation-wide marching in defiance of the government’s privatisation policy in the mid-2000s (Naidoo and Veriava 2005). They argued that privatisation affected the socio-economic interests of workers and the poor in general by leading to poor service provision, higher prices for basic
services, limiting cross subsidisation, job insecurity and casualisation (COSATU 2001). The Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) was conceived and launched under the auspices of COSATU (Buhlungu 2005). Though its power has significantly whittled down, the APF was formed as a forum of loosely structured and flexible coalition of organisations and groups (Buhlungu 2005). At its formation, Sibongile Radebe of the South African Students Congress and John Appolis (COSATU Wits Region) were elected co-chairs of the new Forum, thereby underlining the importance of the workers’ federation in the Forum.

However, despite opposition to GEAR and its fundamental principles of deregulation, privatisation and restructuring, as a means of facilitating employment creation, through accelerated economic growth Reitzes (2009) points out that this objective was not met. Further to this by 2007 unemployment was at 24.3% and inequality was at a high Gini coefficient of 0.660 (The Presidency Report 2008). Job losses that began at the end of the 1990s did not ease (Solidarity Research Institute 2009). The Mbeki administration never appeared to have any intentions of reversing its development policy direction. COSATU as a social movement union therefore had limited success in influencing the development policy direction of the ANC government.

Given the nature of its alliance status (COSATU/ANC/SACP), the labour federation sought to influence the ANC as a political party. While this strategy was used from the onset of the alliance, it seems to have reached a crescendo around 2007 as COSATU felt that President Thabo Mbeki’s government was reluctant to reverse neoliberal policies that were hurting the workers. This is the first time when COSATU explicitly decided to have a say in who leads the ANC. COSATU allied with the SACP and the ANC youth league and masterminded the ouster of the ANC president at the Polokwane conference. Mbeki was replaced by Jacob Zuma. COSATU argued that Zuma would facilitate a fundamental shift in both production and ownership of the economy to help improve workers’ conditions.

In response the Zuma administration launched the National Growth Path (NGP) economic policy in 2010. The major aim of the NGP was to boost economic growth to between 6% and 7% per year and to create five million jobs by 2020 which would reduce unemployment rate to 15%. However, COSATU, which had not been consulted, argued that NGP was not comprehensive enough to transform the economy but a continuation of neoliberal policies, and as a result it commenced a mass Living Wage Campaign (COSATU2010a). COSATU argued that comprehensive economic transformation was vital in order to move many low or underemployed workers out of poverty wages and to create a sustainable wage income strategy that met all basic needs to improve skills and employment opportunities, and reduce income inequality and poverty (Fine2011). In an endeavour to further exert pressure on the government, COSATU convened a Civil Society Conference held on 27–28 October 2010. An estimated 300 delegates from 56 mass-based civil society organisations attended the conference with an objective of rebuilding a strong, MDM which would work with the people and the
The Zuma government’s continuity with neoliberalism and other concerns that resulted in the federation criticising government and considering alternative alliances with other social movements. Therefore, although COSATU was one of the key ANC allies to push for Zuma to replace Thabo Mbeki as ANC president in 2007, the federation became one of the biggest critics of Zuma’s administration during the first term of his government. COSATU argued that the Zuma government performed poorly, particularly with regard to job creation and combating corruption which was in contrast with the 2007 ANC Polokwane Declaration (Cohen and Moodley 2012). COSATU also challenged new Zuma policies that appeared to eat deeper into the pockets of the workers such as e-toll gates in Gauteng and labour broking. Under the banner of the Opposition to Urban Tolling Alliance, COSATU not only marched but also lodged an application to the North Gauteng High Court to have the e-tolling interdicted in 2012 (Phindile 2012).

In contrast, critics of COSATU’s e-tolling and labour broking protests argued that the reason for these demonstrations were more about union membership issues. They argued that if the road contractors were private as is the case with labour brokers, COSATU would have a very small membership and membership fees base as compared to when the road agency is a state entity and labour broking is abolished (Sharp 2013). Casuals associated with the e-tolls and labour brokers would not be a viable source of membership fees for COSATU.

However, despite apparent policy implementation differences between the ANC and COSATU, the trade union has always campaigned for the ANC in elections by way of devoting personnel and resources to the election campaigns, conducting voter education programmes and canvassing voters for an ANC victory as it felt the party offered solutions that other contesting political parties did not offer (Visser 2007). First, COSATU argued that it supported the ANC on the basis of its history and track record of struggle against apartheid oppression and exploitation (COSATU 2014a). The federation also supports the ANC because it argued that its manifests were biased in favour of workers and the poor and therefore the party remained the best party available to pursue left-leaning development strategies while opposition parties were ‘overly negative’ (COSATU 2004b). COSATU also disdains other political parties because it argued that they only stated what was wrong with the ANC but failed to present anything better than the ANC (COSATU 2014b).

The sustained political support of the ANC by COSATU implies that it has to an extent shifted towards political unionism and to the right of social movement unionism. This may explain why it has not been able to win its struggle against the ANC over fundamental macroeconomic policies such as GEAR and the NGP. In political unionism, a trade union plays a subordinate role (Chun and Williams 2013). Challenges posed by COSATU’s shift are discussed in detail below.
COSATU social movement unionism: challenges and prospects for the future

This study contends that COSATU social movement unionism was instrumental in the dismantling of apartheid. However, in the post-apartheid era COSATU social movement unionism has been limited by a number of challenges. This conclusion is also in line with other studies that have established that trade union social movements are more robust in times of struggles for liberation or quest for democracy but, if allied to a political party, tend to drift towards political unionism once political power has been achieved and mostly props up the political power of the ruling party (Chun and Williams 2013).

In light of this, the federation’s participation in the Alliance has affected worker-community action. COSATU’s links with the broader community is now limited as it pays its allegiance first to the ANC. Chun and Williams (2013) posit that the labour body has placed too much emphasis on political unionism by putting the COSATU/SACP/ANC Alliance ahead of the interests of the workers, often making itself not only closely allied or tied to the ANC but subordinate to it. In fact COSATU refers to the ANC as ‘our movement’ (COSATU 2010a), thereby having a sense of being part of the ANC. However at the same time, the ANC argues that it is the party in power and COSATU is not and therefore they cannot co-govern (NUMSA 2014).

A symbiotic relationship has also emerged between the trade union bureaucracy and the ANC leadership which is more related to self-preservation by the elite than general politics (Buhlungu 2005). Thus, it has been argued that the trade union bureaucracy support to the ANC is aimed at securing privileges, financial benefits and political advancement, thereby subordinating the need for the unions to wage struggles against the government of the ANC. Many COSATU officials also hold positions in the leadership of the ANC at different strata of the political system. Key figures in COSATU have gone on to hold key positions in the ANC.

COSATU’s preoccupation with alliance politics has also usurped the militant energy from COSATU that was typical of its apartheid era struggles. Other researchers have also concluded that COSATU militancy has been reduced by incorporation of COSATU into formal institutions of governance such as NEDLAC that usurp the power of politics of resistance, thereby limiting the militant approach of the apartheid era (Mosoetsa and Tshoaedi 2013). Furthermore, COSATU seems to be applying a pedantic approach towards the NEDLAC with the hope that since it is in the alliance, it has another forum elsewhere where it can influence policy. As a result other federations such as NACTU and the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA) maintain established offices responsible for research on NEDLAC issues, while COSATU does not have such an office.
The above circumstances have led to several failed attempts by COSATU and its affiliates to contest the implementation of neoliberal policies (and other anti-worker policies), resulting in a present-day COSATU that seems exhausted – tired of trying and failing, tired of arguing and being silenced, tired of losing jobs and protections for workers, tired of failing to understand. (Naidoo and Veriava 2005, 10)

This is causing disaffection and disagreements about the performance and expected direction of the union within its bureaucracy, affiliates and the general membership as well as its alliance with the ANC (du Plessis 2014). These divisions include disagreements between its general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, and its president that have threatened to weaken or tear COSATU apart (Harvey, n.d.).

COSATU affiliate the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (NUMSA) has now literally pulled out of the alliance and is preparing to launch what it called a socialist-oriented workers party, provisionally named the United Front and Movement for Socialism. NUMSA argues that South Africa is bereft of a political party that can mobilise workers around the effective implementation of the Freedom Charter which has been abandoned by the current leadership which is predominantly drawn from the black capitalist class, which ‘kowtows’ to the dictates of white monopoly capitalist and imperialist interests. NUMSA therefore sees this class of leadership as either unwilling or extremely inconsistent in pursuing a radical democratic programme around the ideals of the Freedom Charter. Although interpreted in different ways, the Freedom Charter was a Congress Alliance document crafted to outline a South Africa characterised by equal access to rights, land, education and decent work among other principles.

In addition to NUMSA, a splinter trade union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) – registered in 2001—has also emerged as a strong challenge to COSATU affiliate, the National Union of Mineworkers, a result of current discounted with the federation (De Lange 2012). AMCU views itself as apolitical and non-communist as it seeks to distinguish itself from alliance politics (“End of NUM’s Hegemony,” 2013).

The rise of AMCU and the departure of NUMSA from the federation as well as the perennial problems of loss of employment, subcontracting and casualisation mean that the COSATU membership base has also been significantly affected. There is therefore a need for the federation to develop alternative means of raising its membership numbers. The Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2014) proposes that COSATU open its membership to other social movements, rural organisations and community organisations to strengthen its struggles on the shop floor, communities and state levels.

COSATU may also need to reconsider its alliance status. The alliance arrangement has resulted in the federation gradually moving towards a type of political unionism rather than its historic social movement unionism. As a result, COSATU has been consistently dominated by the ANC since 1994. This has caused the labour body to play a subordinate role and to play a less effective role in pursuing the interests of the workers.
However, COSATU remains a strong player in the South African socio-economic and political landscape. In view of the ongoing socio-economic challenges that have not addressed the larger expectations of the working majority, a strong voice such as COSATU remains paramount. Social movement unionism remains by far the greatest means at the disposal of COSATU to wage struggles for the working poor through influencing policy both at the national level and in the workplace.

Conclusion

This paper discusses COSATU social movement unionism in both the apartheid and post-apartheid era. COSATU social movement unionism was instrumental in the dismantling of apartheid. While social movement unionism has continued in the post-apartheid era, its utilisation and outcomes have been limited by a number of challenges. These challenges include alliance politics, intra-union conflicts and loss of a militant approach as the union has become incorporated into formal structures of governance such as NEDLAC. However, COSATU social movement unionism remains an important pillar to consolidate gains of the workers and to protect them from the negative effects of neoliberal economic policies.

Note

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