



## REVIEW

*Cosatu in Crisis*  
*The fragmentation of an African trade union federation*

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Vishwas Satgar and Roger Southall (editors)

Reviewed by Elijah Chiwota

**T**otyoyo James, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) first deputy president, announced at the federation's 12th National Congress in Johannesburg in November 2015 that members should read but not buy the book: *Cosatu in Crisis: The fragmentation of an African trade union federation*. If the members were not going to buy the book then how were they going to read it? On second thoughts I mused that workers would always find a copy of the book either by borrowing or perhaps from libraries. However, it is interesting to ponder why the book elicited such a response from Cosatu. A closer reading of the book shows that it is invaluable in its attempt to build an understanding of the complex issues affecting the federation and some of the debates and arguments made in the chapters are as old as Cosatu itself.

The foreword by former general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi can be described as an insider's view if one takes into account that he was at the helm of the federation for 16 years before his dismissal in 2015.

He writes: 'The assault on Cosatu's spirit of independence, militancy, democracy and worker control started several years ago.

The events of the last few years – National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa)'s expulsion, my suspension and ultimate summary dismissal as well as the reluctance to hold a Cosatu Special National Congress – were a culmination of a project that began before 2012 when Cosatu held its 11th National Congress. Back then an attempt was made to get rid of the federation's general secretary. This failed because of internal democracy and worker control which were still strong at that time'.

Vavi aptly summarises the crisis. 'The real basis of the crisis in Cosatu is the complex and contradictory class relationships which it finds itself having to deal with on a daily basis, in the multiclass and unstructured African National Congress (ANC)-led alliance to which it belongs. The crisis in Cosatu is a reflection of the class contradictions and class struggles that are broadly playing themselves out in South Africa and in the liberation movement and its formations between the South African black and African proletariat and the forces of South African colonial capitalism and imperialism'.

Authors in the book are seasoned academics and analysts who are familiar with issues

affecting the country's largest federation and most have published widely on trade unions. One thread that runs throughout the book is the struggle against neo-liberal policies that have been adopted by the ANC-led government such as the Growth Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy and recently the National Development Plan (NDP). These policies have led to job losses, rising unemployment, precarious work, growing income inequality and increasing poverty.

Fragmentation is analysed in the context of the formation of rival unions that includes the Association of Mining and Construction Union (AMCU) and the National Transport Movement (NTM) – an off shoot from the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu). The Liberated Metalworkers Union of South Africa (Limusa) now organises metalworkers in the federation – filling in the gap left by Numsa in Cosatu.

Cosatu entered into an alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in 1994 when the country attained democracy. Although seen as strategic at the time, Cosatu's involvement in the Alliance is seen as one of the ingredients of the crisis.

The Marikana massacre and the expulsion of Numsa from the federation are seen as potential game changers in the crisis. Devan Pillay writes that with the expulsion from Cosatu, Numsa is organising a United Front similar to the United Democratic Front of the 1980s to 'coordinate struggles in communities and within workplaces'. Numsa is also exploring the formation of a workers' party and a new federation. Does this mean a realigning of forces to the left of the ANC?

Another criticism of the federation highlighted in the book is its aloofness when it comes to involvement in community struggles such as service delivery protests. What are the chances for social movement unionism and for Cosatu to be involved in community struggles and for what benefit? Marcel Paret writes that shop stewards were in favour of 'supporting and building working class struggles beyond the workplace'.

The labour aristocracy thesis - that 'formal sector workers have been major beneficiaries of the democratic dispensation - enjoying relatively high wages as a result of the powerful, politically connected unions and excessive regulation' is a fallacy, argue Dick Forslund and Niall Reddy who write that the Marikana massacre and waves of strike action - 'demonstrate the falsity of this view and the urgency of reaching a new understanding of the conditions of workers over the last two decades.' Income and wages inequality continues to be high.

There are possibilities being shaped by the Numsa moment: the United Front, Movement for Socialism and a possible workers' party. On this Vishwas Satgar and Roger Southall throw in a word of caution: 'The speculation in the media and political circles about the Numsa moment is frenetic,

diverse, discordant and extensive, the truth of the matter is that it may take another 20 years of democracy for us to have any clear idea about its significance. Its character and trajectory remains extremely uncertain.

It is against this background of fluidity and uncertainty that this book seeks to offer, not predictions but insights into the character and significance of the present turmoil within organised labour'.

### DEVELOPMENT VERSUS NEO-LIBERAL GLOBALISATION

It is important, says Ben Scully, that similarities are seen between South African trade unions with those from other African countries. Despite exceptions because of settler colonialism and apartheid, there were lots of similarities from the continent that warranted comparative analysis. For instance, Scully argues that economic development periods such as the developmental period (1950-1980) and the neo-liberal period, which began in the 1980s to the present, were important in understanding unions' political strategies. These periods provided a context in which issues played out. For example, the developmental period focused on industrial-led economic growth under which workers were seen as the 'vanguard of national development' whilst the neo-liberal phase is characterised by market-oriented economics. There were many examples of trade unions aligning to political parties in Africa such as seen in the Ghana Trade Union Congress and Zambian Congress of Trade Unions. However, there were also other forms of autonomous unions.

This analysis is important to Cosatu because it was part of the liberation struggle and therefore found it logical to align to the ANC.

Vishwas Satga argues that in terms of ideology the labour movement has been influenced by

different types of Marxism such as revolutionary nationalist, Marxist-Leninist, and social democratic. Moving to democratic eco-socialism that recognises the global capitalist crisis, realignment from ANC alliance especially after Marikana, and the 'Numsa moment' might be the way forward in the future.

The studies draw on the shop steward surveys that were carried out in 1991 and 2012. The surveys show that the roles of shop stewards have not been static. There are more women shop stewards, older and more experienced and better educated than previously. Shop stewards 'remain strongly rooted in the industrial working class, and strongly embedded in their local communities. While fervently committed to the ANC, they continue to evince high levels of independence in their thinking (... with regards to corruption),' writes Southall.

Militants or managers are ideal types of shop stewards. 'Militants tend to be better educated and in more senior jobs than managerial; to have longer experience as shop stewards and to act part-time rather than full-time as shop stewards; to be more committed to transformative socioeconomic policies, and to expect Cosatu to influence these through the Alliance'. Managers often perform the 'managerial function of settling grievances'. Themba Masondo, Mark Orkin and Edward Webster write about 'convergence of relations of conflict and cooperation at the workplace'.

South Africa is the most unequal country in the world, its stability is 'fragile', with a highly unstable social order that can be described using Karl Von Holdt's concept of 'violent democracy'. In this scenario industrial relations are bitterly adversarial, concludes Christine Bischoff. Upward social mobility of shop stewards has led to a 'leadership drain' and 'social distance between shop stewards

and ordinary workers and also between union leadership and the shop floor. The shift from a majority of industrial workers as members to more from the public service shows that the composition of the federation is changing. 'This shift indicates that the social composition of Cosatu is itself undergoing transformation from a working class organisation to one that increasingly represents the lower middle class professionals ... Cosatu continues to represent permanent and full-time workers and has not made inroads into organising casual workers, informal workers and other marginalised workers.'

Alternative moral orders' emerged on the Rustenburg Platinum Belt where strike violence, intra-worker violence, and the state and employer violence became the norm, argues Crispin Chinguno. 'Strike violence has to be framed as a manifestation of capital and labour production politics and contestation for control and resistance and is linked to the broader socioeconomic and political context'.

The book could have benefited from a chapter on the history of Cosatu post-1994 that would have analysed trends in the federation's last 30 years. The only history book on Cosatu is Jeremy Baskin's *Striking back: A history of Cosatu* published 25 years ago. A chapter could also have provided the socioeconomic and political context of SA instead of having the same information repeated in different forms in the chapters. Otherwise the book provides critical analyses that is useful in understanding the current crisis in Elijah Barayi's federation. **LB**

# R2K rejects the call to regulate OTTs

**Right2Know Campaign** rejects the call to regulate over the top services (OTTs) such as WhatsApp and Skype as a move to propel profiteering that has undermined people's right to communicate for years.

**T**he demand by the two telecoms companies, Vodacom and MTN, is nothing more than a cynical attempt to stifle innovation and protect their super-profits at the expense of the consumer. At an informal session of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Telecommunications and Postal Services, the telecoms cartel made their arguments in favour of regulating OTTs, and yet again their true motives were laid bare. We condemn in strongest terms this anti-competitive tendency as it seeks to continue the exploitation of users, in particular the poor.

R2K has consistently fought against the ruthless profiteering and unscrupulous business practices of MTN and Vodacom. In this latest move - despite the broad definition of OTTs being used, which includes streaming media et cetera - it is plain to see that the real targets for the call for regulation are Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) providers such as Skype, Whatsapp and Facebook. These services offer a relatively affordable and convenient alternative to the messaging and calling services offered by the mobile network operators, especially when taking into account the extortionate airtime rates that these service providers charge.

The arguments presented by the two telecoms cartel in favour of OTT regulation are about as flimsy as MTN's claim that it does not dodge the taxman. OTTs are not a real threat to the profitability of telecoms companies, and Cell-C has broken ranks by embracing OTTs, which reflects its status as a late entrant into the market whose primary need is to acquire market share.

As Alison Gillwald, director of Research ICT Africa, made clear in her presentation at the hearing, the telecoms cartel have been and still are unusually profitable and are steadily investing in network capacity. For Vodacom and MTN to claim that their investment capacity is at risk is farcical, especially now that infrastructure-sharing is becoming more common.

In addition, despite the mention by several speakers of the fact that users do pay for VOIP services in the form of normal data which is profitable for the telecoms companies, the dogma is constantly repeated even by a representative of ICASA, that OTT services make 'no contribution' to the networks which they are 'exploiting'. If these companies want to talk of exploitation, they need not look beyond themselves. As our Lived