

## THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF COSATU: A RESPONSE TO PLAUT

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Plaut (1986) claims to address the question as to what has changed in relation to the labour movement in South Africa since 1984. I do not believe he addresses this question adequately. He acknowledges neither the profound tide of popular resistance over this period, nor its impact on popular organisation and in particular on the unions. Thus he fails to specify the political shift in position between FOSATU and COSATU - which is precisely what defines the political significance of the new federation. These failings in Plaut's analysis are in large measure the consequence of the 'workerist' framework from within which he writes; a framework which needs to be critically examined.

### THE TRADE UNIONS BEFORE 1984

In the decade leading up to the period of escalating mass struggles which began in 1984 'workerism' came to dominate the political practice of the major industrial unions. It was a position which did include a range of political, theoretical and practical positions, but I shall not try to do justice to all the nuances. Briefly, it tended to separate trade unions from other forms of popular organisation and political organisation. It based this separation on the argument that popular organisation was dominated by political forces (specifically the ANC and the SACP) hostile to working class interests; that nationalism was essentially a petty bourgeois concern; that the working class needed to engage in a directly socialist rather than national democratic politics; and that its organisations should be independent, steering clear of class alliances and nationalist politics, since these would hijack the workers. In practical terms this came to mean that the trade unions were almost the only appropriate vehicle for developing working class politics. Some felt it was logical for a working class party to emerge out of the trade unions in order to put forward a specifically working class programme.

The unions that were able to grow and sustain their growth during the period of expanding union membership from 1979 were the industrial unions that concentrated on shopfloor issues and the development of resilient, democratic shopfloor organisation. This was the strategy indicated by a workerist position (although not only by this position), and its success strengthened the convictions of workerists. In contrast, the more politi-

cally orientated general unions, such as SAAU, were less able to consolidate on the shopfloor and found it difficult to withstand the concerted political repression directed at them.

Although workerism dominated their practices, the unions were not monolithic: there were different strands of workerism, and there were individuals, trends and even whole unions whose theory and practice were close to, or part of, the national liberation position. Even in the workerist unions it is unlikely that the mass of the rank and file and shopfloor leadership saw the trade unions as being separate from other struggles in the same way as did the union leadership.

Although I am concentrating on the theoretical and strategic weaknesses of workerism, it is necessary to stress at this point the crucial importance of the contribution the industrial trade unions have made and are making to the struggle in South Africa. Workerists played an absolutely critical role in building these unions. The emphasis on the painstaking construction of shopfloor organisation enabled the unions to survive several periods of intensive state repression laying the foundations for COSATU as a powerful federation capable of exerting a tremendous influence within popular politics, both as an organisation and as a training ground for worker militants. The emphasis on shopfloor democracy and worker leadership means that the unions are responsive to the demands of the rank and file. At the same time, the development of a militant 'politics of production' has produced a unionism that goes beyond both the limits of social democratic unionism on the one hand, and the limits of classical Leninism on the other.

It is highly likely that an early shift into the political field in the 1970s would have seen the unions smashed by the state. At the same time, when national politics did re-emerge publicly in the 1980s, it often concentrated on mobilisation and tended to neglect grassroots organisation. The opposite stress by the trade unions provided a valuable counterweight. But it was specifically at this point that the workerist emphasis on the separation of unions from other popular organisations weakened the trade unions as a political force, and weakened the popular movement as a whole.

#### MASS POLITICAL STRUGGLE AND THE TRADE UNIONS

Despite their strengths, the official political position of the trade unions left them ill-equipped to respond to the explosion of mass community and political struggles that came to a head in the Vaal Triangle in September 1984, spread across the country and continued through 1985/6.

Beyond some background description, the only event Plaut notices in this diverse range of struggles is the November 1984 Transvaal stayaway. This

was undoubtedly an extremely significant action, both in terms of political effectiveness, as well as the way it brought unions into the political arena, opening the way for an alliance of popular organisations and engendering respect for the disciplined muscle of organised workers. In fact its greatest significance was the role it played in the process of overcoming the deep mistrust sown between unions and community organisations.

Nor did this joint action burst out of the blue. It was the outcome of these processes amongst others:

- \* the process of rebuilding the profile of the national liberation movement, which had begun in the late 70s;
- \* the formation of the UDF, which had the effect of placing national politics on the agenda. Unions found themselves forced to respond and assert themselves politically, as when they took up the anti-tricameral campaign separately and in parallel to the UDF. Thus political positions began to clarify;
- \* co-operation between worker militants and political activists, and between shopsteward councils and community organisations began to develop;
- \* an increasing disjunction between rank and file pressure for political engagement and the official politics of many of the unions;
- \* the underground structures of the ANC were probably strengthened during this period, and were unlikely not to have been involved in some of the above processes.

While the stayaway was heralded by many as opening a new period of mass struggle in which unions would be the leading and dominant partner, the following two years saw little political initiative on the part of the trade unions. It was clearly the UDF and its affiliates which took the lead in popular struggles, both at a local and national level. The situation varied from region to region. On the East Rand a closer working relationship developed between unions and community organisations; in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage the old and bitter divisions widened even further. But in general national liberation politics became increasingly hegemonic through the manifest ability of the UDF and its affiliates to challenge state initiatives in the political arena - particularly the Tricameral Parliament, the Black Local Authority System and Apartheid education. The growing stature of the ANC, both amongst the oppressed people and within sectors of the white ruling block were further signs of this hegemony.

While popular struggle intensified, and state response became more and more violent, there were heated debates, struggles and shifts of opinion in the trade unions. How should the unions respond to calls for boycotts of white shops, or for work stayaways? How should they handle violent intimi-

dation by youths often left leaderless by State action against their organisations? Ought they to intervene in the national education crisis? How should they relate to the increasing popularity of nationalist symbols like the lionization of Nelson Mandela, ANC flags and so on? Time and again the unions found themselves forced to respond to an initiative or a call that came from the UDF and its affiliates, rather than initiating political action themselves. This period was marked by the inability of the unions to lead political struggle or take the initiative. It became clear that unions, as conceived of by workerism, were unable to act as vehicles for working class leadership in political struggle.

At the same time increasing numbers of trade union members began playing an important role in youth and civic organisations. Shop steward locals became more and more involved in community politics. Thus although trade unions as formal structures were not leading the struggle, leadership and structures that had developed within the unions were more and more interpenetrating and combining with other forms of popular organisation.

These workers engaged in popular struggle as a national liberation struggle since the terrain of struggle against state power is structured by apartheid. It was these trends in the union movement, most significant in the Transvaal, that culminated in the formation of COSATU as a federation with a very different political line than that of FOSATU, a line that places it firmly within the historical tradition of national liberation politics.

This political line has placed COSATU in a much stronger position to play a key role in initiating campaigns, in directly influencing political decision making in resistance politics, and in taking forward the task of building working class leadership in struggle and hegemony within an alliance of resistance organisations. This new potential was evident in the 1986 May 1 and June 16 stayaways as well as in the Christmas against the Emergency campaign, and helped consolidate the worker-student alliance.

Plaut, in ignoring the political failure of workerism and the political dominance of the national liberation position misses the political significance of COSATU.

#### THEORETICAL DEFICIENCIES OF WORKERISM

Workerism's historical failure highlights some of its theoretical and strategic deficiencies. It suffers from the theoretical problem of class reductionism which attempts to reduce all political, social and ideological issues directly to class issues. Issues which cannot be reduced are regarded as unimportant and discarded. Workerism is class reductionist to the extent that it argues that national oppression and struggles against it are

a veil concealing the real relations of capitalist exploitation. At the same time, they are a veil determined by capitalist relations, and therefore reducible to them. Thus politics can be reduced to class issues and fought out on the real terrain of class struggle rather than the fictional terrain of nationalism.

Closely related to class reductionism is the class essentialism of workerism which assumes that the relations of production bestow on workers an essential class nature. Organisation based in the relations of production represents the class nature of workers and thus their essential class political programme. This is the theoretical underpinning for a persistent conflation of trade union with working class with socialist movement, and of community with other classes, with populism and petty bourgeois leadership.

Workerism therefore tends to give sole organisational privilege to the site in which class relations are constituted, ie the economy. The trade union comes to be seen as almost the only appropriate form of class organisation. This leads to the invariable tendency of workerism towards economism, either because of an explicit position that the economic struggle is the most central struggle for the working class, or because, in failing to grasp the specificity of the political, workerism cannot in any concrete practical way engage workers in political struggle. It is thus forced to fall back on educational programmes that show how capitalism is the 'real' problem and socialism the 'real' solution.

Consequently it cannot grasp the way the institutions and practices of apartheid and national oppression have so structured social and political life as to define the terrain of struggle for political power. It is unable to deal with the question of nationalism and generalised popular struggle against an oppressive regime. It cannot grasp that the struggle for hegemony and political power takes place on this ideological and political terrain, and that only on this terrain is the working class able to take on its national tasks. If the working class is to win national leadership it has to enter the arena of profoundly national and popular symbols, ideologies and struggles.

Workerists abandon the site of national political struggle to other class forces, and to the extent that workers do take part in national political life they are abandoned to other class forces and in particular to petty bourgeois politics. Often relations between organisations are conflated with class alliances, so that the relation between trade unions and civic organisation is conflated with that between working class and petty bourgeoisie - as if there were no workers in youth, civic or political organisations and as if these organisations did not, therefore, in

themselves constitute an alliance of classes. Because workerism is so suspicious of class alliances and of relations with other popular organisations it tends to isolate the workers in their unions and is thus unable to develop workers' understanding, in practice, of other organisations, or of other classes and strata. The result is its inability to develop working class leadership over the struggle as a whole and of addressing the central question of political power.

#### FORMS OF ORGANISATION

Workerism tends to be fixated on the model of accountability and mandate provided by shopfloor organisation. While this form of organisation is absolutely crucial for any attempt at social transformation, and while one of the most urgent political tasks of the moment is to deepen and extend this form of democracy in the street committees and schools as well as in the factories, and while it must be acknowledged clearly that individuals and organisations with workerist tendencies have made a decisive contribution to the building of this sort of organisation - at the same time, this model cannot answer each and every political question.

For example, the shopfloor model offered very little guidance on how to challenge the government's initiative in introducing the Tricameral constitution. What was required was a massive political campaign that could mobilise literally millions of people against the government initiative, counterposing the popular demand for a non-racial democratic South Africa. Such a campaign required political initiative and political leadership that could combine the energies of diverse sectors of the popular movement and capture the national imagination. Trade unions, although they contributed to this campaign, could not have led it: their ability to go beyond their membership, their ability to capture the national imagination through political leadership is too severely constrained by their organisational form. At the same time, their workerism, which took the form of an at best lukewarm attitude to the UDF, deprived them of the opportunity to influence the direction or ideological tenor of the campaign.

There is no doubt that the campaign, led by the UDF, was a tremendous achievement. The government lost its initiative to the popular movement. As the political campaign meshed with student and community struggles to produce a climate of resistance unprecedented in our history, so political mobilisation began to be transformed into grassroots organisation. The street committees that came out of this thrust do work on a similar model to factory committees. But to argue that right from the beginning UDF ought to have devoted its attention to organising street committees rather than to high-profile political campaigning is to miss the complex dialectic

between leadership and spontaneity, mobilisation and organisation.

#### PLAUT'S QUESTIONS

The changing political position of the trade unions has been accompanied by responses within workerism and African nationalism, with a corresponding shift in the terms of debate over working class strategy. The key issue now is no longer whether trade unions should co-operate with popular political organisations, but rather how they should co-operate, and how best to assert working class leadership in the struggle. The debate over a Workers Charter, and the significance of the Freedom Charter is one instance of this. However, Plaut does not deal with these issues, and neither will I.

Most of the questions raised by Plaut are formulated within a workerist framework. For instance, 'populists' wish to subordinate the unions to the UDF or the ANC, and therefore have little respect for the democratic wishes of the union membership. On the other hand, the workerists stand for democracy, working class independence and leadership. This is, however, an inaccurate rendering of the issues at stake. The real issues are the nature of the struggle, the nature of politics, the question of alliances and of how best to build working class leadership.

Certainly there are those in the popular movement who stand for subordination and who do not have a high regard for democracy, just as there are workerists in the unions who are not innocent of undemocratic practices themselves. This notion that workerists stand for democracy and the popular movement doesn't is a red herring.

Plaut asserts categorically that the UDF is undemocratic (1987:69-70). This is a breathtakingly facile statement. Few activists in the UDF would deny that at times regional structures of the UDF have been insufficiently democratic, that some affiliates are less democratic than others, and that the democracy of some comrades is more rhetorical than real. But anyone more than casually associated with the UDF would know of the immense amount of energy, discussion, work and struggle that has gone into building the process of democratic discussion, mandate and accountability. This work has continued and in fact deepened under the immensely difficult conditions of two States of Emergency. But for observers such as Plaut democracy is something that falls ready-made from the sky and, it seems, is by its nature incompatible with popular struggle. Thus UDF and community organisations are a priori undemocratic.

Plaut uses the term 'populist' loosely. 'Populism' refers to petty bourgeois ideology and political practice that identifies the interests of the petty bourgeoisie with those of the people as a whole. Lacking a critical analysis of capitalism, it opens the way to a reformed capitalist solution of social crisis, rather than a radical transformation. Populist political

practice relies on demagogic leaders rather than popular organisation. It mobilises the masses as an undifferentiated 'nation' or 'people' without recognising different class interests, and without building working class organisation and leadership within the movement.

Undoubtedly there are such populists within the national liberation movement, and nationalism does provide fertile ideological ground for populism. But to conflate this kind of populism with the political understanding and practice of the majority of activists in the youth, the communities, student organisations and trade unions (ie in the popular movement) makes it impossible to understand the political dynamics of the popular movement. If analysts actually wish to understand what is happening they will have to stop using the concept 'populism' in a way that blinds rather than enlightens, ie stop conflating 'populist' with 'popular movement'.

Plaut compounds his errors in his discussion of various speeches of Cyril Ramaphosa, general secretary of NUM, and Jay Naidoo, COSATU's general secretary. He attempts to find evidence to suggest that Ramaphosa is a workerist and Naidoo a populist (Plaut, 1986: 65). The notion that Ramaphosa, the leading official of an organisation that has chosen Nelson Mandela as honorary president and has adopted the Freedom Charter, is a workerist is quite simply inaccurate. Both Ramaphosa and Naidoo are clearly working from within the framework of a national liberation position, which stresses the need for a comradesly relation to movements such as the UDF and the ANC. Within that position both are arguing for working class hegemony and both are arguing for fundamental transformation in the South African economy and society. In other words, neither are populists. There may be differences of emphasis between them, but that depends at least in part on the specific audience they are addressing and on the particular point in time that they are speaking. Thus Ramaphosa's keynote speech to COSATU's founding congress was made before the COSATU delegation which included both Naidoo and Ramaphosa, had met with the ANC. COSATU's political position is one that has developed and changed, and will continue to develop and change over time, in the light of experience and changing conditions of struggle.

#### A NATIONAL LIBERATION POSITION

Plaut's mechanical notion of working class 'independence' makes it difficult for him to accept that COSATU can be independent at the same time as it signs a joint communique with the ANC stating that 'lasting solutions can only emerge from the national liberation movement, headed by the ANC, and the entire democratic forces of our country, of which COSATU is an important and integral part.' (COSATU-ANC-SACTU Document, 1986: 29).

This communique does not mean that the ANC instructs COSATU what to do. It is a position that recognises, firstly, that only joint action by all democratic forces can bring 'lasting' solutions; secondly, that the ANC has an increasingly hegemonic status in our country and that it does in fact head the liberation movement; thirdly, that a trade union movement, albeit going far beyond the instrumentalist role assigned it in orthodox Leninism, cannot 'head' a political movement. Any major political campaign would have to be the outcome of joint consultation between all democratic forces. Clearly there is room within that - indeed a necessity - for organisations such as COSATU to put forward the position of their members. That is what independence means, and that is what is meant by the assertion that 'COSATU is seized with the task of engaging the workers in the general democratic struggle, both as an independent organisation and as an essential component of the democratic forces of our country' (COSATU-ANC- DOCUMENT, 1986:30).

No-one, notwithstanding the claims of Plaut (p. 69), believes that working out these relations in practice will be easy or 'proceed smoothly'; nor are the answers ready-made - they will have to be built over time, in practice, in struggle. There will be mistakes. There will be differences between organisations, and struggles between class interests over strategy, over democracy, over liberation and its meaning. But this is part of the struggle for working class leadership within the national liberation movement. Politics without this sort of process is inconceivable.

Sidney Mafumadi, COSATU Assistant General Secretary, makes this point clearly:

As to what will happen in the future, that will depend on the balance of forces at the time of the seizure of power. Working class leadership does not emerge out of the blue. It has to be fought for in the ongoing struggle. Our historical mission is not to ask other people to stop what they are doing, but to locate ourselves and assert the centrality of the working class within that ongoing activity. The politics of the democratic majority at the moment is the politics of resistance. We cannot be at the forefront of a struggle in which we are not participating. Our task therefore is to make the politics of the working class the politics of the democratic majority. We must make the militant youth in the streets of our ghettos, the students in the Bantu Education schools, the housewife in the four-roomed matchbox, the unemployed person who is condemned to starve to death in the Bantustans understand that capitalism is the root cause of all our sufferings. The alternative to this is to organise ourselves as a

sect and this will not lead us anywhere near a South Africa which will banish land, famine and hunger. (Mafumadi, 1986: 18)

Nationalism is not simply a negative force. It is a very potent and deep political force that has been generated in resistance to colonisation and national oppression; it unites the most diverse classes and strata in town and countryside into a battering ram against the target of their anger; it focuses the people's will and articulates their desire for freedom. Any serious struggle has to situate itself within this deep popular current. Nor is this route quicker or easier. There quite simply is no other route: it is prescribed by the conditions of South African struggle.

This is not of course to say that nationalism guarantees full social transformation. It is a question of the balance of class forces within nationalism, which in turn depends on strategies of struggle, organisational forms, and struggles over democracy, ideology, etc. This is why COSATU is so important.

The alignment of COSATU within the national liberation movement has already made a great difference to the liberation movement. It has strengthened and deepened popular resistance, and people in all sectors have gained confidence and inspiration; it has given leftists within national liberation politics greater weight and cohesion; it has been one of the several factors in bringing the issues of socialist transformation explicitly on the agenda; and it has increased the potential for developing the leadership and hegemony of the working class in the struggle as a whole and on its many fronts - youth, communities, students and political organisations.

The new energy and determination, and the new strategic issues and debates that the realignment of the union movement has provoked are evident in many places - shop steward locals, union congresses, mass meetings, youth organisations, conferences, even in the streets of Johannesburg. One only has to compare these developments with the political isolation - an isolation that appears to arouse nostalgia in Plaut - of the unions before 1984 and one has a true picture of the political significance of COSATU. It is precisely this coming together of forces which has put socialism well and truly on the agenda.

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