New South African Federation Prioritises Marginalised

Militant Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) unionists in the 1980s swore the federation would never become a transmission belt for party politics. But like other post-independence African unions COSATU succumbed to temptation. Sucked into crippling ANC politics it expelled its largest and most independent union, the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) in 2014 and its general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, the following year. These expulsions followed years of poor servicing, infighting, lack of recruitment and failure to organise millions of workers in atypical jobs. This breakdown was dramatically highlighted when COSATU’s then largest union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), lost 50,000 members on the Rustenburg platinum belt to the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). This followed a police massacre of 34 mine workers (78 injured) in 2012 during an illegal strike, which the NUM failed to support. The once mighty COSATU - which played a critical role in the downfall of apartheid - now wobbles in a dangerously weakened state.

Launch of New Federation

On 21 April this year, a new federation arose – South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). At the founding congress a constitution, name and logo were adopted by 1400 delegates from 24 unions with 700,000 members.

SAFTU emerges after two years of discussion on trade union unity. Initially talks were held between NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions), FEDUSA (Federation of Unions of South Africa) and Vavi on the basis that unions should be independent from employers and political parties, worker-controlled and democratic. However both of the former later withdrew from talks. Negotiations nonetheless continued and in September 2015, 26 unions resolved to search for unity. A Workers’ Summit convened in April 2016 and was attended by 1500 delegates, representing 52 unions. Signalling the new federation’s rootedness in working class communities, 22 civil society organisations were invited as observers. At the Summit the launch of a new federation was endorsed.

SAFTU’s Membership & Leadership

Many SAFTU members come from NUMSA but some independent unions have also brought in substantial membership. Some splinters from ex-COSATU affiliates, formed after factional struggles often in response to corruption and lack of servicing, have also joined SAFTU. Ex-COSATU affiliate, the Food & Allied Workers Union, came over in its entirety whilst other unions joined as independents. A further 16 union observers at the Congress may enter the federation at a later stage.

In a departure from COSATU’s single sector union style of organising, SAFTU embraces both industrial and general unions. This raises the sticky question of how to build power in a particular sector and also the temptation for single sector unions to poach members from general, or smaller unions to build their power. As a number of SAFTU unions operate in the same sectors the congress strongly discouraged membership poaching. Mergers, co-operation and support for smaller affiliates were encouraged.

The popular Vavi emerged as the general secretary. Leadership came from a range of sectors including the public service, metal and food. Regrettably however, despite the federations’ commitment to empowering women, none are present in the leadership.

SAFTU is independent from political parties. It is a socialist inflected federation with a Pan-African outlook. It will set up a political and ideological commission to establish how to engage on the question of political influence and power. Some delegates supported NUMSA’s intention to establish a workers’ party. The federation aims to foster worker-controlled structures with high levels of leadership accountability to members. This democratic focus extends into the membership it aims to recruit, which will include workers from the informal sector as well as the unemployed.

Organisation & Servicing is King

SAFTU’s aspirations are lofty and inspired by the organisational power of COSATU in its days under apartheid. Now it needs a strong organisational backbone and a focus on servicing members.
of South Africa’s unorganised workers. SAFTU has set the ambitious target of one million members by the end of the year. It aims to reach out to workers in fast food shops, restaurants, casinos, horse racing and other entertainment industries, workers under labour brokers, the unemployed, community members and informal traders.

However the unionists in SAFTU mainly have experience of organising in the formal industrial and public sectors. Organising atypical, casualised, migrant and informal workers will require creative strategies, which SAFTU has yet to articulate. There is some evidence of informal workers piggybacking on the power of industrial unions elsewhere in Africa, and SAFTU will need to be open to exploring such new ways of organising. There are also a number of formations organising waste pickers, informal traders and own account workers in South Africa, and SAFTU will have to be sufficiently flexible to work with, and learn from, these organisations.

SAFTU does not aim to compete with COSATU but hopes to attract workers through quality of its servicing and its socio/economic campaigns. A task team of high-level leadership will make recommendations to the next NEC on systems to apply across affiliates. This will be expressed in a Service Charter to set servicing standards. One of its strategies is to create an Organising Operations Centre staffed by experienced officials to co-ordinate recruitment and servicing campaigns. Alongside this a Call Centre will operate staffed by people trained in SAFTU’s ‘Protocols for Recruitment Framework’, unions’ scope, and the basics of labour law, to enable them to give immediate advice where possible.

Consolidating different affiliates’ organisational cultures will be one of SAFTU’s most difficult and immediate tasks. Contrary to COSATU’s intolerant ethos it will need to encourage open debate that takes into account differing ideologies. An acceptance of workers’ control will be central to this. SAFTU places a large emphasis on conducting campaigns, which is one strategy to reach isolated workers. However it needs to balance campaigning with the building of solid structures to give its campaigns depth. Building workers control will need first to happen in the workplace wherever possible and ways of ensuring this will need to be carefully explored.

Functioning local and provincial structures, recruitment and other campaigns will be dependent on strong workplace links while workers taking ownership of their federation will reduce capacity problems. To this end SAFTU aims to develop systems, rules and procedures to ensure a living culture of democracy. It will be obligatory, for example, for affiliates to take mandates for NEC meetings, and thereafter to report back directly to members.

Independence from the state and management implies financial autonomy. SAFTU asks for R1 a month from each member of its affiliated unions in subscription fees. This will allow for baseline functioning but it will still need to raise money from sympathetic organisations to ensure regional and national meetings and decent education programmes. It may need to engage with state funded organisations like the Development Institute for Training, Support and Education for Labour (DITSELA) to force them to again become dynamic vehicles for workers’ education.

Addressing Socio-Economic Concerns

SAFTU seeks to promote its organisational, economic and political power through the conducting of campaigns. To this end it will launch a campaign with AMCU (not yet affiliated) to focus on jobs and the economy. This will entail debate on economic policy something the federation has not yet spelt out. Together with AMCU it will commemorate the 5th Anniversary of the Marikana massacre. This will be followed by a march to the Union Buildings in November and a conference on the Future of South Africa in December 2017.

These events will focus on SAFTU’s demands for the banning of labour brokers and an end to casualisation in favour of decent work. It will also demand an end to job losses and the scrapping of the recently co-determined minimum wage of R3500 a month. This will be contentious with some arguing that recently amended laws require workers to be made permanent after three months and that most workers earn below the R3500 minimum and raising it to this level will be a struggle in itself. Enforcement however is an issue and perhaps SAFTU’s demands speak to this weakness in the state.

The Congress listed a host of socio-economic demands to address – including the crisis in public education, transformation of state enterprises, nationalisation of banks, problems around limitations on the right to strike, farm evictions, violence against women and children, legalisation of informal mining and state corruption.

Conclusion

SAFTU is now the second largest federation in South Africa (COSATU’s one million membership is in decline). Optimism and excitement suffused the launch. This enthusiasm must now translate into the hard work that organising from below implies. SAFTU’s task is additionally complex because it prioritises the marginalised - the lowest paid, informal traders and the unemployed. This could galvanise massive support. Commented Vavi, ‘we must revive the hopes of the working class, build a mighty, mass movement and mobilise workers and poor communities at work and on the streets to assert their power and start the fight-back’.

One of its biggest challenges is not to sell hope without the strategies and capacity to take organisation forward. It will be operating in a hostile environment; unlike COSATU, it will not have the support of an ANC alliance. Workers’ organisation has been neglected for years and slow organisation and education will be necessary to build worker power before it can take on the multiple inequalities that plague South African society.