

Strategic Perspective on the International Trade Union Movement for the 21st Century

This paper is an initial setting out of ideas presented for discussion and debate by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Based on feedback and comments we receive, we will redraft the paper and present a final document that will be our formal submission to the ICFTU. The paper is circulated to a number of trade unions with whom we have bilateral relations, and these unions cover a wide range of ideas and perspectives: in this sense, we want the debate to break out of the traditional categories and camps that so much of the international debate has fallen into in the past.

We welcome comments and viewpoints, including those that differ with some or all of the starting points. These should be forwarded to COSATU at the following fax number + 27 + 11 + 403-0803 or to simon@cosatu.org.za.

- Introduction

The trade union movement represents the most formidable force within civil society in contemporary global politics and the world political economy. Trade unions are a countervailing force against the powerful bloc of multinational companies, international financial institutions and industrialised countries that seek to consolidate their hegemony over the world political and economic system at the expense of the weak. Because of this potential, unions always attract attacks and labels from those who fear their power.

A progressive trade union movement plays a larger role than just representing their members on the shop floor. It must have a central role in democratisation both of politics and economic policy. To fulfil these roles, it has to be characterised by greater internal democracy, ensuring worker control of the operations and decisions of the union.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ideological divisions within the trade union movement decreased, and many trade unions saw the need to build a united global trade union movement. This led to the consolidation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) as the most representative voice of organised labour. Today, we bring together affiliates from all five continents representing millions of workers.

This growing consolidation of organised labour is an important and positive development. Yet the international labour movement is still battling with its legacy from the cold war. Too often, the international trade union movement relies on boardroom tactics and diplomacy instead of using the power of the working class. It often replaces open and robust debates in structures with deals between a few, financially powerful national centres, and the continuation of an inner circle of trade unions able to influence the direction of the entire movement, which can undermine internal democracy. We have seen a preference for 'off-the-record' discussions on important issues, instead of these being discussed within executive structures.

The single greatest challenge facing the ICFTU is to change its nature and character into a fighting machine capable of leading the working class around a minimum platform of demands that will reverse the marginalisation of workers and the poor.

This paper outlines the perspective that the international trade union movement must embrace to meet the challenges of globalisation. Above all, it argues that the trade union movement should work for unity, adopt a minimum platform for social justice, and transform itself to play a critical role in the unfolding struggle for social justice.

- **Perspective on transformative unionism - values, ethics, beliefs and traditions**

The trade union movement should combine bread-and-butter struggles with broader social, political and economic campaigns. A working class movement solely concerned with workplace struggles is bound to lose, since the broader political context is shaped by capital's agenda. Experiences in many parts of the world demonstrate that engagement and struggles on a broad platform has delivered more to the working class than a narrow, parochial approach. On the other hand, a high-flying trade union movement interested in broader political issues only, at the expense of its members' daily concerns is bound to find itself in the margins of history, the victims, not the shapers of history. In order to survive, unions must find a balance between their broader socio-political role and the daily needs of their members.

To play its role, the trade union movement should adhere to the principles of organisational independence, democracy, worker control and a transformative political perspective.

Free and Independent: Workers themselves establish unions to defend and advance their interests at the workplace and the broader socio-political level. Because of their power, political forces and capital always seek to influence the unions, co-opting them, neutralising them, at worst virtually taking them over. Unions can only be free if they are guaranteed no interference from governments, political parties and employers.

A progressive trade union movement should not only be satisfied with consistent lip service to its independence. It must jealously guard its autonomy, and be seen by members to be a true representative of their undiluted aspirations.

Cold war politics, combined with the pressure to make the ICFTU the most representative international movement for workers, have over years compromised the principle of free and independent unionism. A number of the current affiliates would fail a rigorous test of independence, despite this being one of the most important principles of the ICFTU. We must have the courage and leadership capacity to ensure that all affiliates adhere to the basic principles on which our movement is founded. Size is very important, provided there is a basic unity of ideas and purpose.

Democracy and worker control: Unions are not established for workers, but are established by workers themselves to defend and advance their rights. A trade union that does not maximise workers' participation is bound to face extinction.

A serious problem arises if unions purport to represent members on issues while leaving the workers themselves in the dark. This is tantamount to self-mandating, and is undemocratic. Workers must be able to associate with every activity of the union, and must have control over whatever is carried through to negotiations.

There is a trend today in some unions for the bureaucracy to 'manage' democracy for workers, on the grounds that this is 'practical' or is 'efficient'. This runs the risk of bureaucratising the trade union movement. The principle of worker control has to become a reality.

Freedom and solidarity: By nature, a trade union movement should be on the side of the weak, marginalised and sidelined, within its own country and all over the world. Unions are the automatic ally of those who face discrimination on the basis of their race, creed, religion and sex, because of the continent they come from, or any other reason. Trade unionists are inherently internationalists who fight against injustice wherever it exists.

Solidarity is therefore a guiding principle that can never be compromised. Supporting discrimination or doing nothing about oppression and marginalisation of any group, disqualifies any trade union from the transformative trade unionism referred to in this paper.

But solidarity is not about speeches and resolutions: it is about action we are prepared to take, resources we commit, and sacrifices we make to support working people elsewhere.

Retaining the bias towards the poor and working class in socio-economic policy: Trade unions must always support policies and measures that seek to bring the marginalised into the mainstream, and the weakest into more advantaged positions. In this context, unions must advance workers' demands around progressive economic strategies that can close the gap between rich and the poor, set a basic floor of rights for all workers, and ensure gender equity and social protection. At the centre should be the need to lift the standards of living of the poor and the working class and smash inequality within and between nations.

This position pits the union movement against the forces of neo-liberalism, which seek to impose stringent adjustment policies for which the workers pay the cost through unemployment, cuts in social protection, and so forth. Unions are by nature against the neo-liberal dogma, which represents an attack on gains made by the working class movement over many decades.

Social Justice in the 21st Century: The ICFTU must transform itself into a fighting force that is an ally and a real representative of those most marginalised by globalisation. By combining lobbying and active campaigns, we must campaign for equity and the elimination of the huge gap in income between North and South countries. We must form alliances with progressive governments in the North and South, and campaign for active policies that will bring about the equity. But the ICFTU should recognise that inequalities are not only found between the South and North. Increasingly, the gap in income within developed and, even more, within developing countries is enormous.

These factors inform our work on an agenda for social justice in the 21st century. Linked to this is the need to consistently update our organisational strategy to confront the manoeuvres of multinational companies. At the centre of their strategy is the systematic replacement of formal, secure and well paying jobs with temporary and insecure work that offers no job security or social protection. On the African continent, this situation is compounded by the fact that informal sector and survivalist activities are often already even bigger than the formal industrial sector. We need to go beyond the protection of our historic gains in order to expand quality employment into new areas.

Working in partnership with other progressive forces: Unions must acknowledge that, despite their power, they cannot on their own bring about the changes needed to confront the neo-liberal agenda imposed by globalisation. We need to forge strategic and tactical alliances and partnerships with progressive political parties and non-governmental organisations that identify with our vision and minimum platform. Trade unions should avoid retreating into a narrow laager, but instead should challenge for political and social space, should seek out allies and nurture and strengthen them, should lead a progressive alliance of working people.

Building the trade union movement: The working class is faced with a unified force comprised of multinational companies, powerful states and international financial institutions. The decades of cold war left the trade union movement fragmented. Our movement is particularly weak in the African continent and much of the developing countries. Conscious effort is needed to deal with this situation.

The unity of the trade union movement is vital: Nothing is bigger or more important than the unity of workers. It is bigger than the name of our organisations, our logos, bigger than considerations of leadership positions, bigger than our specific history or any other issue.

The ICFTU must set the goal of consciously working for unity of the international trade union movement. Its affiliates should consolidate this march to unity by eliminating divisions at the national and continental level. The role of the ICFTU should be to put pressure and programmes to realise the dream of unity for every country and continent. Guided by the slogan "One country - One affiliate," we must actively promote the unity of workers, where necessary by releasing resources. The national centres themselves should be pressured to end destructive competition for membership. The proliferation of unions should be eliminated and workers be taught that only unity can provide protection against the onslaught of neo-liberalism.

The struggle for unity has important organisational implications. The time of general unions that offer workers little prospect of acting in solidarity with one another should belong to the past. Unions should organise broadly along industrial and sectoral lines, with powerful national centres that co-ordinate resources and action on behalf of national unions.

There is another important dimension: unity requires that we strongly pressurise countries with more than one national centre affiliated to the ICFTU to amalgamate into one centre, within a defined period of time, with tough mechanisms to ensure that this is realised.

Promote participatory democracy: It is a difficult challenge to manage a national union movement that prides itself on its democratic norms, which allow members to dictate their destiny. An even more daunting challenge is to manage an international trade union movement that allows every national centre to feel part of the family and influence the direction of the movement.

We have no choice but to take up this challenge. The trade union movement must operate differently from international institutions of capital, like the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organisation. Yet all too often, the culture of managing democracy, lack of democratic debate and fear of different points of view makes a mockery of our oft-repeated declaration of being a democratic organisation.

Our congresses and other structures must deliberately open space in a structured fashion to allow debates, and our resolutions must reflect the debates within our structures.

As an important example, we believe the ICFTU Congresses should be changed so that the real discussions and debates are shifted from small resolutions committees into the Congress itself. Of course we need to do this mindful of the constraints of time: yet key debates should be identified, and worked through by Congress, not smaller committees. Congress should not function like the Plenary of the International Labour Conference of the **ILO** where we all make speeches for the record, but should be interactive, and should shape policy.

The Millennium Progress Review Group should therefore comprehensively review our rules, procedures and structures, with the view to establishing a stronger, more participatory democracy within the ICFTU, where different points of views will not only be tolerated, but indeed actively promoted.

- **Our socio-economic outlook**

In line with the instinct of identifying with the marginalised and the weakest, the ICFTU should develop a comprehensive policy on the great divide between the South and North countries. Central to such a policy should be recognition that the system of colonialism combined with the cold war left most countries in the South devastated, with weak economic and political systems. In these countries, poverty, unemployment, disease, ignorance and general underdevelopment are at their worst. In these countries we can measure in real terms the devastating impact of the “survival of the fittest” approach to social change.

Let us be frank: in developing countries, the large masses of workers do not know of the ICFTU, let alone look to it and its programme as a beacon of hope and a focus of struggles against unemployment, poverty and powerlessness. It does not help for us to dust off our resolutions and 'prove' we have good positions on debt, or structural adjustment programmes. We have not captured our positions in a way that can serve as a counterpoint to the agenda of capital.

The trade union movement must develop a comprehensive alternative to globalisation, neo-liberalism and the structural adjustment programmes of the **IMF** and **World Bank**. Our vision should be underpinned by the following:

- International solidarity to address the inequalities between and within countries and regions;

- Within countries, addressing poverty and underdevelopment through comprehensive social protection combined with economic development strategies aimed at creating quality jobs, meeting basic needs for food and housing, and improving workers' access to education and training;
- Globalisation of human rights and workers' rights as a cornerstone of development and fair trade;
- Elimination of unfair trade practices and rules, and adoption of deliberate measures to ensure that international trade and investment support equitable development, and that the voices of civil society are actively represented on international institutions that regulate trade;
- An end to the debt burden on the poorest countries;
- Use of social funds and retirement funds to promote investment that combines economic returns with social advances in developing countries;
- Rules on movement of capital that will not only challenge the speculative character of much portfolio flows, but will shift the balance of power that capital has gained through free movement of capital back to democratic institutions.

Once we have developed our minimum platform, we should canvass for its acceptance by the progressive NGOs with which we normally work. Progressive political parties and governments should also be urged to support the framework. The platform should guide our engagement with the IMF, World Bank and other U.N. institutions. We should have a strategy towards the IMF, World Bank and **WTO** that combines globally co-ordinated mass action campaigns with an engagement strategy.

To establish this framework, the Millennium Review should be expanded to look beyond organisational restructuring and embrace concerns around broader development. It should encourage a thorough going debate in each country, sub-region and region, with sufficient resources allocated to this for us to really develop a bottom-up platform for growth and equity in the global economy.

- **Organisational Review and Restructuring**

In the context of the preceding paragraph, the need for a comprehensive review of structures cannot be overemphasized.

- **A platform for global organising**

Despite our strength, we must recognise that the trade union movement is unevenly developed between countries. In many parts of the South, unions remain weak and dependent on and sometimes controlled by governments. In most industrialised countries, union membership is declining.

There are many reasons for these weaknesses. Some workers take the past victories of the unions for granted. Others find unions unattractive because over the years unions have been bureaucratized and no longer help improve conditions of employment. Unions have generally not modernised their tactics, structures and organising methods, leading to a perception of irrelevance. In many countries, we have not unionised white collar workers sufficiently. The growth of non-standard employment, with part time work, contract work and casual work has left unions with new organising challenges. In some countries the industrial base is in decline. The traditional manufacturing sector is shrinking, with growth only in the service sector, or informal sector, which requires a different organising strategy.

Our detractors must never be proved right when they accuse us of representing an elite. We must retain the mass character of the unions, not through slogans, but with practical programmes to build the unity and power of workers.

The Millennium Review should look at levels of organisation at each country. It is critical that a global campaign be launched to recruit more workers into our ranks. The ICFTU should set itself hard targets of the number of unionised members we must achieve, by country and by sector. It must help to set up the structures to achieve this, and reallocate resources to this goal.

The campaigns by a number of national centres should be drawn on as examples from which we can learn, both in their strengths and weaknesses.

One example is the COSATU 'Spring Offensive' which sets aside a month of recruitment and organising, where shop stewards of affiliated national unions are released from work for between one week and four weeks, to go and organise workers at unorganised workplaces, in the informal sector and in rural areas, not only in their own sectors but elsewhere too. Over the past three years, this has resulted in 150 000 new members into COSATU.

Another example is the campaign of the **AFL-CIO** to reverse the decline in membership in the USA, with centrally co-ordinated recruitment campaigns, national company targets, and pooling of resources and organisers.

Such campaign can draw on other experiences, such as that of the **FNV** in organising part time workers as part of a broader policy of regulating part time work in the Dutch economy, or the provision of new services by unions in Ghana and South Africa to organise the informal sector.

At a global level, this opens up the opportunity for us to share skilled organising staff, and target companies globally for unionisation. As an example, we may have a 'Membership Offensive' in Asia in March, Europe in June the Americas in August and Africa in October with media and personnel co-ordination at global level.

This campaign should be co-ordinated at sub-regional level and supervised at regional and international level.

- **Campaigns**

The international trade union movement must move away from being a lobby group to become an effective organisation capable of disciplining capital, governments and other institutions. It must provide and co-ordinate effective solidarity. It must facilitate a worker-to-worker contact and give workers a sense that they are a single family and do not exist in isolation.

Our experience in South Africa, and indeed the working class movement's experience globally shows that what you have not won in the streets, you will not win at the boardroom table. The recent past, highlighted by the mass demonstrations in Seattle in 1999, shows that workers are willing to embark on campaigns to support their demands and pledge solidarity with one another. These experiences prove that the problem is not a lack of capacity. Rather, it is a tradition of relying excessively on lobbying, which developed when the movement was weaker than today.

Our choice of leaders, of tactics, of organisational structures, of resource allocation and of allies, must reflect this strategic shift of engagement from diplomacy to the terrain of global campaigning where our latent strength can be realised. Diplomacy and negotiation must be built on this foundation, not be a substitute for action and campaigning.

We have experiences of successful international campaigns during the struggle against apartheid. The anti-apartheid movements of Europe and Australia relied, not on sending faxes and e-mails to the apartheid regime, but on active mass campaigns led by workers who refused to touch goods from South Africa in the harbours and inland. This is the kind of campaign we need now against the Burma, Colombia and Swaziland regimes.

Within the ILO itself, we should combine our strategy of negotiation with global campaign on the actual demands we table in Geneva. A maternity Convention provides an opportunity for the labour movement to make the gender concerns of working women a key part of the gender agenda, and to unite the women's movement and the labour movement in common struggle to advance the rights of women, and to promote gender equality.

The international labour movement should also identify a list of companies who are the global sweatshop leaders, companies like Nike, and run global campaigns with consumer groups, students and others, and provide a unified basis for struggles in all countries, where such goods are sold or made, in order to secure commitments around union rights, and an end to exploitative labour.

The international union movement must build its capacity for campaigns and actions. That requires stronger regional capacity to support global campaigns. The Millennium Review offers an excellent opportunity to explore how best to achieve this aim.

- **Global collective bargaining**

Multinational corporations are circling the globe in search of cheap labour and resources. In the past, we relied on bilateral relations to track them down and force them to uphold standards. We have established regional organisations and increasingly (at least in Africa) there is a realisation of the crucial role that sub-regional organisations can play in forcing the multinational corporations to observe fair labour standards, protect the environment and embrace good corporate governance. All these initiatives have played a role in ensuring that global capital does not have a free hand to reverse gains made in the past.

In some sectors, **ITSs** have concluded company level agreements with certain multinationals. In Europe and Mercusor, there is the beginning of cross border bargaining in some companies. In the maritime industry, there is a global agreement on certain conditions of employment. All of these are very modest and small, compared to the requirements of the times we live in. We should now embark on a substantial programme of global bargaining, identifying key companies in the sectors where we are strong, and concentrating global campaigns on securing global bargaining.

With this should go the setting up of more global shop stewards councils, within multinational corporations, but also in certain sectors where these are feasible. Through the Millennium Review, we must seriously explore the possibilities and modalities of global bargaining and of global shop stewards councils. We can also set clear targets and timeframes. In this way, the Millennium review will result in a concrete outcome that is of help to workers across the world.

- **The informal sector**

The international labour movement must address the growing importance of the informal sector and casual or temporary labour. We have seen the replacement of secure, well-paid jobs with an insecure, casual and temporary army of working poor, with less rights and social security. In some countries, employers now believe that the informalisation and casualisation of labour is the best way to roll back our gains. At the same time, rising unemployment in developing countries increases the pressure on workers to accept lower standards. Because of the nature of their jobs, many of the affected workers are afraid to join unions and are sceptical of the potential benefits.

We need a workable strategy to organise informal and casual workers. Otherwise, all that we stand for will be eroded while we watch helplessly from the sidelines. Already there are small but effective examples of trade union organisation of the informal sector in Holland, South Africa, Ghana and India, that we can draw on, and see which elements of those approaches are applicable on a wider basis. The Millennium Review must propose effective measures to address this problem.

- **Gender**

For too long, unions developed slogans to show their commitment to gender equality and the elimination of women oppression, without taking practical steps to eliminate these inequities. Whilst progress has been registered, the time has now come to develop decisive measures to change the situation.

We have a responsibility to address gender in the unions, in the workplace and in society. Often gender issues link to other developmental issues. Structural adjustment often results in tariff liberalisation that puts female textile workers out of work. The informal sector is in many cases a ghetto where women are condemned to working without fair labour standards or legal protection. Trade unions should lead these struggles.

The Millennium Review must explore concrete strategies to increase the representation of women in ICFTU structures. In that context, it must determine whether measurable targets are needed wherein each center will be given a target to reach over a specific period of time regarding women representation in all its structures. Affiliates should be pressured to implement policies that will dramatically alter the current situation.

- **The perspective for Africa and the South**

The vision outlined in the previous sections has ramifications for the trade union movement of Africa and the South in general. Unions in Africa and most parts of the South require special measures to strengthen their organisation.

This requires that the ICFTU structure its debates and programmes carefully. Whilst it is necessary to continue to consolidate the strengths of the unions in the industrialised countries, it is important to recognise the challenges facing unions in the South. For example, unions from the industrialised countries are looking at how best to strengthen worker-to-worker solidarity through e-mails, internet and sophisticated telephones. In contrast, unions in the South often do not have basic telephone lines or even electricity in their offices.

Failure to acknowledge these differences may lead to a situation where a sizable number of unions keep quiet in the ICFTU meetings because the issues addressed there do not reflect their needs or concerns.

Solidarity requires that unions in the North debate too how their societies can help the development of the South. Currently trade policies, the actions of MNCs, the policies of the IMF and World Bank, foreign direction investment flows and prices paid for Africa's resource wealth, all combine to continue to undermine Africa's economic and social development. Hard choices need to be made, and workers in all countries should struggle together, and be prepared to make economic sacrifices, to help develop all countries, so that we have a shared prosperity.

A special challenge is to strengthen Africa's union movement so that, working in partnership with ordinary people and other progressive movements, it can help drive the African renaissance. The continent is still largely underdeveloped, ravaged by years of colonial plunder, mismanagement in the post-colonial era, internecine wars and abject poverty. The African trade union movement is weak and fragmented at national and continental level. In these circumstances, the African Union and the Millennium Recovery Plan are being shaped without effective participation of working-class formations or the broader civil society.

Unity of the African union movement is a precondition for labour to take its place in the affairs of the continent. This should result in a vibrant trade union movement that can ensure that worker concerns are taken into account in developments such as the African Union, regional economic integration processes, and the Millennium Recovery Plan. To play this role, the African trade union movement should learn to champion its own course, instead of always relying on others to explain its pain. The dependency syndrome should belong to the past.

The Millennium Review process must strengthen unions throughout the South, including in Africa. As the basis for this work, we need to map out the nature of unions in the South – membership, representivity, whether national centres and their unions are genuinely independent, free and democratic, and so on. A deliberate process to unify national centres should be based on the results of the research.

In Africa, the Millennium Review must consider the consolidation of continental organisations. OATUU was formed by African governments, in accordance with the principle of non-alignment. The ICFTU formed ICFTU-AFRO as its regional structure. In addition, continental WCL and WFTU organisations still survive. The challenge is to ensure that these divisions belong to the past, and that we rapidly and with urgency set up a single continental centre, within a clearly spelt out timeframe.

The ICFTU-AFRO and OATUU should be called upon to shape a trade union strategy for Africa. As a minimum, this strategy should call for:

- Peace and stability;
- Democracy, including participatory democracy;
- A strong public sector to steer and foster development;
- Agriculture and industrial development to exploit the riches of Africa for the benefit of its people;
- Regional development strategies;
- Workers' rights and the abolition of export processing zones that bring neither development nor substantial job creation;
- Social protection and the eradication of poverty;
- Lifting of trade barriers against African products by industrialised societies;
- Cancellation of foreign debts and;
- A development plan for the continent, on a scale at least as large as the Marshall Plan introduced in Europe at the end of World War 2, and financed by the international community.

Achieving these aims requires support from the entire international trade union movement. The pursuit of this minimum African and South platform should not be limited to unions from the South and Africa, but become the duty of all trade unionists.

• Conclusion

We have here proposed a minimum programme that progressive movements across the globe should follow and pursue. The Millennium Review process is the golden opportunity, both historic and well timed, for a debate on all these matters.

Quite clearly from this paper, the debate on how best the ICFTU can be positioned has just began. It requires a thorough going debate not just within the Millennium Review Progress Group, but that extends to every national center, to every affiliate of the national centers, to all international and other continental organisations, and to every workplace.

What we require is a series of events and to promote and popularise this debate. Series of continental workshops culminating into special regional conferences and a global conference to consider the recommendations or providing a report to the next ICFTU congress is the ideal way of concluding the debate.