

What kind of trade union movement do we want? *A programme for social unionism*

1. Current reality

2. Options

3. Our vision

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This chapter argues that social unionism is the best option for responding to the challenges described in the September Scenarios. It recommends a 12-point programme for social unionism.

1. Current reality

The Commission formulated the September Scenarios in August and September 1996. When we presented and debated the scenarios in COSATU, we found that audiences most readily identified **Skorokoro** as the current reality.

However, elements of both **Pap, vleis and gravy** and **The desert** scenarios coexist with **Skorokoro**. The very existence of NEDLAC, the negotiated agreement of the Labour Relations Act (LRA), the significant progress made by some government ministries in formulating and beginning to implement coherent policies, and in transforming parts of the bureaucracy, all point towards **Pap, vleis and gravy**.

On the other hand, there are elements in the current reality that point towards **The desert**. The most significant of these is the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR). If it is dogmatically implemented, GEAR could lay waste to the economy, destroy the state's capacity to deliver, and destroy the Alliance. This would take us into **The desert** scenario.

So, any one of the three scenarios could ultimately prevail. COSATU needs to be prepared for them if necessary.

In our view, **Pap, vleis and gravy** is the desired scenario. COSATU needs to develop the strategies and capacity to block the **Skorokoro** scenario from developing into **The desert**, and to shift from **Skorokoro** to **Pap, vleis and gravy**. The scenario of **Pap, vleis and gravy** is not itself ideal. There are real difficulties and dangers which are suggested in this scenario. One is that large groups in society are excluded from development. Another is that the ANC and its Alliance partners become moderate and short-sighted, losing sight of the vision of transformation and socialism.

More specifically, there are dangers that COSATU could become complacent and co-opted via the Alliance and through co-operation with employers. This would mean COSATU losing its internal

democracy and dynamism. COSATU needs to be prepared for these dangers, and develop its strategies and its organisation accordingly.

What sort of trade unionism can best achieve these objectives? To sharpen this discussion, we outline four options below.

2. Options

2.1 Zigzag unionism

Zigzag unionism is affected by the same problems as the **Skorokoro scenario**. The trade unions zigzag from one issue to another. They are inefficient and keep losing skilled shopstewards and staff. They have no strategic capacity and so cannot be proactive. Their policies are contradictory and ad hoc. Their culture of solidarity is undermined by the new culture of self-enrichment. The union movement is a victim of the culture and conflicts in society, rather than an active agent for social change

2.2 Moses unionism

Moses unionism is the kind of trade unionism that can lead workers through the desert. It adopts a stand of permanent opposition. It appears very militant, it preaches a simple message of socialism, and it attacks all obstacles with mass action. This kind of unionism may be appropriate in the desert scenario, but if COSATU finds itself in **Pap, vleis and gravy**, or in **Skorokoro**, adopting the option of *Moses unionism* would be inappropriate. It would lead to more losses than gains.

2.3 Social unionism

Social unionism is social in the sense that it is concerned with broad social and political issues, as well as the immediate concerns of its members. It aims to be a social force for transformation. Its goal is democracy and socialism. Its influence on society is based on its organised power, its capacity to mobilise, its socioeconomic programme and policies and its participation in political and social alliances. It is committed to workers control and democracy, and to maintaining its character as a movement. It is proactive and effective. It is able to negotiate and monitor complex agreements with government and employers. It is able to make important contributions to national economic and social development. *Social unionism* is viable as a challenge to **Skorokoro**, and in **Pap vleis and gravy**. It has no real prospects in **The desert**.



Campaign on basic conditions: social unionism struggles for power in the streets - Photo: William Matlala

There is a danger that *social unionism* could be co-opted by employers and politicians. The union movement could become more concerned to support government and enhance the competitiveness of capital, subordinating the immediate concerns of its members to the need for 'stability' and 'national development'. The result would be complacent and bureaucratic unions, controlled by technocrats and experts.



... and at NEDLAC - Photo: William Matlala

2.4 Bread & butter unionism

Bread & butter unionism abandons any concerns with broader social or political issues, and focuses on the immediate demands and interests of its members. The main terrain of *bread & butter unionism* is collective bargaining in the workplace and the industry. But it will also lobby and engage employers and

government nationally on issues of direct concern to workers. It can be militant and democratic, or it can be quite bureaucratic and technocratic. *Bread & butter unionism* could be viable in response to **The desert** or **Skorokoro**, where the Alliance is not coherent, has disintegrated or is stagnating.

3. Our vision

We recommend that COSATU pursues the option of *social unionism*. COSATU's traditions and its goals point towards this strategy, although currently COSATU runs the danger of becoming a *Zigzag* union movement. As a fall-back position, if **The desert** becomes the prevailing scenario, COSATU would have to seriously consider *bread & butter unionism* or *Moses unionism*.

In the rest of this chapter we discuss social unionism in more depth, drawing on COSATU's history and its goals.

3.1 COSATU's historical contribution to society

Under apartheid black workers had no rights in the workplace. The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 excluded African workers from the legal definition of an 'employee'. Management control of black workers in the workplace was reinforced by white power and black powerlessness in society, ie by apartheid. Successive white regimes - colonial, segregationist and apartheid - created a range of institutions to control black labour. Migrant labour, pass laws, compounds, hostels and bantustans were all mechanisms to control black labour in society and in the workplace.

COSATU and its predecessors' achievement was to win the struggle for basic worker and trade union rights during the 1970s and 1980s. They used a wide variety of forms of struggle. They engaged employers in many different ways, including negotiation. Through building powerful workers' organisation COSATU compelled employers to negotiate with it. In doing this COSATU initiated a practice of negotiation and dialogue across the frontiers of apartheid, and in this prefigured the national political negotiations which ended apartheid and ushered in democracy. COSATU and its affiliates were the pioneers of the practices of negotiation, consultation and participation which are so important in our new democracy.

The apartheid oppression which workers faced at work mirrored apartheid oppression beyond the workplace, in society at large. The trade unions, therefore, combined trade union struggle with political struggle. Building on the trade union traditions of the 1950s, COSATU became, during the 1980s, a central force in the liberation struggle and the democratic movement in South Africa. As the strongest and most coherent organised force inside the country, it made a massive contribution to the collapse of the apartheid regime and therefore to the new era of democracy, civilisation and human rights in our land.

COSATU's role, however, has not been confined to the struggle to end apartheid. In addition to pioneering the practice of negotiation, and new workplace and collective bargaining institutions, it has made important contributions to the new institutions of our democratic South Africa: to the Bill of Rights and the new Constitution, to the democratic spirit and functioning of parliament, and to the formation of NEDLAC, among others.

One of COSATU's most important contributions to our new society is the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP sets out an ambitious programme of institutional change and economic development to meet the needs of our newly-enfranchised people. It is not simply a programme to meet the needs of trade union members, but a programme to meet the needs of the people as a whole, and especially the poorest and most dispossessed. It was adopted by the ANC as its programme of government, and won wide support from virtually all layers of society.

3.2 A new kind of struggle

Our history is a history of struggle against oppression in the workplace and in a society structured by apartheid - a struggle to overthrow an unjust order. It was at the same time, as outlined above, a struggle which produced institutions and practices which prefigured elements of a democratic South Africa. During the transition COSATU contributed to the institutional outlines and goals of the new order with the new Constitution, the RDP, NEDLAC and so on.

Now COSATU finds itself in the democracy that it fought for. It is no longer mobilised in opposition to the apartheid regime - we have a democratic government, elected by COSATU members amongst others, and with which COSATU has an alliance. COSATU seeks new relations with employers. It is now concerned with issues that were not its concern in the past - economic development, productivity, the functioning of the public service and of government.

But the past order continues to exert a powerful influence on our new democracy. Apartheid created and protected massively unequal distributions of wealth, resources, power, education and income. These inequalities continue to define our society. Many apartheid institutions, structures and relationships continue into the new South Africa. Hence the need for *transformation* - a process of struggle to redistribute power, wealth, resources, income and education, knowledge and skills.

We are poised in a historic moment. The democratic movement has an opportunity to overcome the legacy of the past and build a new society through a process of transformation. Or it can let the past drag down the future and overwhelm it. It can seize the opportunity, or squander it. Those who ushered in the transition, including COSATU, need to adapt their strategies and policies to take up the new challenges of transformation.

The struggle now is a struggle for development, for democracy, for social justice, for overcoming the deep-rooted legacies of apartheid. COSATU is challenged to take responsibility for economic development, for strengthening democracy, for ensuring delivery of services, and for exercising moral leadership in society.

This is a much more complex, difficult and contradictory struggle than the struggle against oppression. COSATU needs to combine dramatic mass actions with sophisticated policy work, protracted negotiations and trade-offs, gradual change and institutionalised influence. There is a new tension between advocating the interests of society, and defending the specific interests of members. These tensions may be creative, but they also hold new dangers.

In taking up these new struggles, the challenge is to mobilise past traditions to build a vigorous trade union movement able to contribute decisively to the making of a new society which honours and rewards its workers and citizens.

The trade union movement which has been built over the past twenty years and more, is based on the following traditions:

- strong shopfloor organisation and a militant struggle for worker rights, collective bargaining and power
- an active, democratic organisation controlled by workers and based on campaigns and mobilisation
- incorporation of broader social issues and interests into our programme, thus building alliances with community organisations, with the political movement, with intellectuals, etc
- rejection of apartheid and support for non-racialism
- a struggle for democracy and social justice
- commitment to development and growth in the democratic South Africa.



COSATU has always taken up issues beyond the workplace - Photo: William Matlala

4. Recommendations

Traditions and principles built in past struggles are a great resource for COSATU. It should draw on the past in building a trade union movement for the future.

In positioning itself for the future as a powerful union movement, we recommend COSATU should adopt the following 12-point programme. This is a programme for *social unionism* in South Africa.

- i. COSATU should increase its size substantially, becoming a home for all working people.
- ii. COSATU should build powerful organisation in all workplaces and sectors, able to defend workers rights, bargain for better wages and benefits, improve working conditions and the quality

- of working life, struggle for workplace democracy and service the needs of workers and shopstewards effectively.
- iii. COSATU should build the federation and its affiliates as fighting organisations with efficient structures, led by effective, assertive and coherent leadership.
 - iv. COSATU should build dynamic, democratic, vibrant organisation which empowers its members to be active as workers, as trade unions members, and as citizens.
 - v. COSATU needs to develop the internal practices and goals that ensure our staff are skilled and committed, proud and happy to be trade unionists.
 - vi. COSATU and affiliates should become a home for working women, with many women leaders and staff, demonstrating in practice its ability to improve the working life of women.
 - vii. COSATU should rebuild a powerful working class movement, entailing a strong organisational relationship with an ANC which is biased towards the working class, as well as alliances with other social movements, NGOs, intellectuals and students, etc. COSATU should retain its independence while building alliances.
 - viii. Democracy is a tremendous historical victory for the working class. COSATU should commit itself to consolidating, deepening and extending democracy in South Africa - in other words, to political transformation or the redistribution of power.
 - ix. COSATU is the biggest organisation representing the creators of wealth in South Africa. As such it should continue asserting its role in economic development, in redistribution of wealth, income, resources, knowledge and skills, and job creation.
 - x. COSATU should continue asserting its goals of broader social justice - the delivery of services to all citizens, the construction of a social welfare system, ending the wealth and income gaps produced by apartheid, a Living Wage for all, helping to end crime, corruption and violence, etc.
 - xi. In pursuit of the above goals COSATU needs to develop the resources and capacities to engage effectively with the Alliance, government, parliament, NEDLAC, provincial and local government, and with employers at sectoral and workplace levels.
 - xii. COSATU should ensure that it is a force to be reckoned with, increasing its influence in society and winning strong support from society. It should seek to deepen the culture of solidarity in society, as a counter to the culture of self-enrichment.

The rest of this report is an elaboration of this programme. The commission decided that there are three strategic priorities for building this kind of COSATU:

- to develop the vision, goals and strategies to take COSATU into the next century
- to develop a programme for building organisation
- to build the capacity of COSATU and affiliates.

This led us to focus our attention on the following chapters:

Chapter 3: Political vision, goals and strategies

Chapter 4: Economic vision, goals and strategies

Chapter 5: A vision, goals and strategies for transforming the public sector, because this is critical for the broader transformation of our society.

Chapter 6: Our workplace vision, goals and strategies, because this has been lacking in COSATU.

Chapter 7: Strategies for responding to the labour market changes which characterise globalisation.

Chapter 8: Strategies for building women leadership and participation in COSATU, because this is a key principle of COSATU and previous policies have failed dismally.

Chapter 9: Strategies for building effective organisation, because this is a necessity for improving the capacity of COSATU and its affiliates and implementing any of the visions and strategies recommended in other chapters.

Chapter 10: Recommendations for the reform of COSATU structures, to ensure that it is able to implement the recommendations made in other chapters.

Chapter 11: Important issues that the Commission was unable to consider, and that we recommend should be referred to Phase Two of the September Commission.

We decided not to deal with the issue of capacity separately. The recommendations in every chapter include recommendations to build capacity; and chapters 9 & 10 are by their nature concerned with the capacity of union organisation.