

THE UPDATE

COSATU 40th Anniversary Special Newsletter Edition

Welcome

We are thrilled to welcome you to our weekly newsletter, your essential guide and official countdown to the COSATU 40th Anniversary Rally this December!

This Issue

History of COSATU

1973 Durban Strike

COSATU Call Center

Blast from the Past: “Siyalala la”

Anniversary details



Date: 6 December 2025

Time: 10h00

Venue: Dobsonville stadium,
Soweto, Johannesburg



History of Cosatu

The history of COSATU did not begin in 1985; its foundations were laid by a powerful worker uprising a decade earlier. The 1970s marked the resurgence of black trade unionism after decades of harsh suppression by the apartheid state. This period, often overlooked, was the crucial spark that ignited the worker movement.

The beginning of the decade was defined by spontaneous, massive strikes in the industrial hub of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, in 1973. Tens of thousands of black workers, fed up with starvation wages, oppressive working conditions, and the lack of political representation, walked off the job.

These were largely unorganised, illegal, and politically explosive strikes. The key takeaway was clear: the workers had power, even without official unions. The 1973 strikes and the subsequent formation of these independent unions shattered the apartheid government's myth that black workers were content. They demonstrated a powerful, organised resolve that paved the way for the unity talks and the ultimate formation of a powerful national federation: COSATU.

Call Center hours

Monday - Thursdays : 08h30 - 17h00

Fridays: 08h30 - 16h30

Weekends: Closed

Holidays: Closed

Our Call Center Number:

OIO 002 2590



Cosatu Call Center

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), in partnership with Rand Mutual Assurance (RMA), recently launched an expanded and technologically advanced Call Centre, hosted at COSATU House in Braamfontein. This initiative marks a significant strategic move by the federation to modernise its reach and provide direct, reliable, and expert-driven assistance to all workers across South Africa.

The new Call Centre is a powerful demonstration of COSATU's commitment to its foundational principle: "An injury to one is an injury to all." It extends the union's traditional support beyond its formal membership to the broader working class, including non-unionised workers and the public in general. Millions of workers, particularly in the informal, agricultural, and domestic sectors, are not members of a trade union and often face exploitation alone. The Call Centre now serves as their first point of contact for labour advice, ensuring they are not left feeling "alone or ignored," regardless of where they work. This directly addresses the goal to organise the unorganised.



Pre-1973

- Black Trade Unionism was largely crushed and underground since the early 1960s.
- Workers were largely restricted to workplace issues.
- Union Structures were fragmented or non-existent.



Post-1973

New Unions Emerge: The strikes directly led to the establishment of new, shop-floor-based, non-racial unions, such as the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), which would later form the backbone of COSATU.

The strikes demonstrated the central role of the working class in the fight against apartheid, linking economic struggle on the factory floor to the broader political struggle for liberation.

Federation Building: This new wave of militant trade unionism led directly to the formation of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979—the immediate predecessor to COSATU in 1985.

The Spark: 1973 Durban strike

As we count down to the COSATU 40th Anniversary Rally, we look back at a pivotal moment in our history—a moment of mass civil disobedience that shattered the silence of the apartheid state and laid the foundation for organised worker power: The 1973 Durban Strikes.

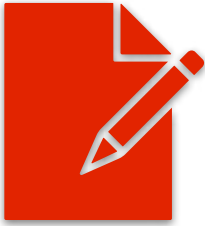
The actions of African workers in Durban were not just a demand for wages; they were a roar against the entire system of racial capitalism and a direct challenge to the apartheid regime.

Mass Action: Over the next three months, the strike became a sustained, coordinated, and non-violent wave of industrial action. By the end of March 1973, nearly 100,000 workers, predominantly African, had downed tools, impacting over 100 firms. This represented roughly half of the African workforce in Durban.

Key Sectors: The strikes hit crucial sectors, including textiles (most notably the large Frame group of companies), metal, chemical, and shipping. The sight of massive groups of workers, often marching and singing, demonstrated an unprecedented level of grassroots organisation.

The 1973 Durban strikes were the moment workers stood up, sang their demands, and reclaimed their power. They proved that mass action, solidarity, and organisation were the only tools needed to confront the most brutal system of oppression.





Blast from the past article: “Siyalala la”

The “Siyalala la” or sleep-ins, have already been used in many factories, as well as in the mines and they worked.

We must see the sit - ins on two levels, says Siphso Kubeka of the Paper, Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAWU). It makes workers feel the power of ownership and control of the factories. It also puts management on the defensive and gives more bargaining power to the workers.

Normally in a strike workers walk out of the factory, and leave management in control of the area. But as Kubeka says, management could then lock the gates and dismiss workers and bring in scabs.

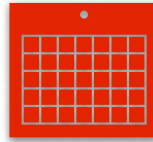
But when workers sit in, workers are in control of the factory. The bosses have to beg the workers to leave.

Workers have used sit - in strikes to demand union recognition, higher wages, to stop dismissals and retrenchments, for the right to plant-level bargaining, and for May Day to be paid holiday.

SASPU Focus Vol 5 May, 1986

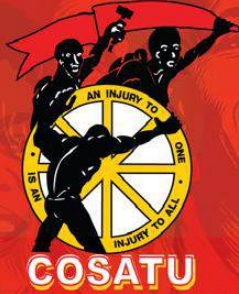
Workers have a new weapon against the bosses: “Siyalala la”, which means “we shall sleep here”





Calendar

Coming this November



She is COSATU

40 WOMEN, 40 YEARS

For forty years, women have been the backbone of COSATU - building unions, leading strikes and challenging patriarchy at work, at home, and in the movement itself. COSATU honours forty women whose courage and struggles represent thousands more. Their voices, victories, and resilience tell the story of COSATU's past and inspire its future.

SHE IS COSATU. SHE IS WORKER'S POWER.

Launch of
COSATU Women's Herstories Project:

40 WOMEN, 40 YEARS OF COSATU

4 November 2025
— Time: 9am - 1pm —
Holiday Inn Johannesburg Airport
100 North Rand Road, Boksburg

PANEL DISCUSSION:
"Feminism in action"

Dialogue with veterans on Lessons, Turning points and Unfinished struggles

Speakers: • Connie September
• Patricia Kumalo • Susan Shabangu
• Nise Malange • Chris Bonner

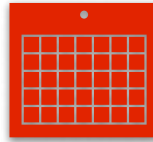


LAUNCH SPEAKER
COSATU President, Zingiswa Losi





40 Years of Struggle, Strength, and Solidarity with COSATU!



Calendar

Coming this December

6 December 2025

Dobsonville Stadium, Soweto

Gates open at 10am

ANNIVERSARY RALLY

'Build working class unity for economic liberation towards socialism'

Marching Onward: 40 Years of COSATU Leadership!