

Memorial Lecture on the former President of COSATU, Comrade John Gomomo, by COSATU General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, 30 April 2014, Port Elizabeth

The Provincial Executive Committee of COSATU

The leadership of the Alliance

The MDM and civil society formations present today

The family of comrade John Gomomo

Comrades and compatriots

I bring comradely greetings from the COSATU National Office Bearers, the Central Executive Committee and the entire 2.2 million members of COSATU.

We have for long recognised April as heroes' month, when amongst others we honour two of our greatest leaders in the fight for freedom - Oliver Tambo and Chris Hani – both of whom we lost in April 1993, so that they missed their chance to vote in the elections that they did so much to make a reality.

But tonight we honour another very special hero, our former President Phumzile John Gomomo. To his family members here tonight, thank you for giving us comrade PJ as he was fondly called. He led our mighty workers' movement with distinction. In December COSATU will be celebrating 29 years of unbroken struggle with and for the working class and the poor.

It is fitting that we remember him on the eve of May Day, when we dip our banners in memory of all our fallen heroes like Comrade John, and recommit ourselves to the cause to which they dedicated their lives. As we celebrate him, we also recall other workers' leaders in particular from this region and province. The list is endless but it includes Elijah Barayi, Vuyisile Mini, Wilton Mkwayi, Raymond Mhlaba, Thozamile Gqwetha, etc.

Today it's a turn of Comrade John Gomomo. So let's trace his contributions to workers and our people's struggles. Gomza began work as a machine operator in a textile factory then joined Volkswagen South Africa in 1963, where he took part in the 1973 Durban Strikes and became a member of the United Automobile Workers (UAW) in 1977. In 1980 this union merged with others to form the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU), affiliated to the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU).

This was a time when the union movement was under attack, and many organisers were banned from playing any further part in the movement. Some felt so frustrated

that they left the country to continue the struggle in exile under the leadership of the ANC and the South African Congress of Trade Unions - SACTU.

Yet it was a period which also saw an explosion of youth activism, symbolised by the 1976 June 16 student uprising, the turning point in the struggle which led to a qualitative shift in the tactics employed.

Our revolution would certainly not have advanced and recorded the victories we count today if it were not this formidable worker/youth axis who, together with others, form the core of the only reliable and revolutionary class, the working class.

The young Phumzile John Gomomo was influenced by his experiences of both the 1973 Durban strikes and the 1976 wave of student militancy and the lesson he drew from his experience was to throw himself wholeheartedly into the workers' movement and the trade unions!

In the early 1980s he was elected as a full-time shop steward at Volkswagen and led two more major strikes in 1980 and 1982, leading to the recognition of full-time shop stewards.

He served in NAAWU's executive council and also served as a member of FOSATU's National Executive Committee. In 1987 NAAWU merged with other unions to form the militant and fighting National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) and comrade Gomomo was at the heart of talks that led to its launch.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, when Comrade Gomomo served as a leader in the union, the tempo of the South African liberation struggle increased. The new federation, COSATU, which he had helped to build, had become the target of the apartheid system and its leaders were on their hit list.

After 20 years of democracy and human rights we must never forget the risks that union leaders faced in those dark days. For example, in the morning of 7 May 1987, two big bombs ripped through the basement of COSATU House, which COSATU and its affiliates were forced to abandon. This formed part of the apartheid regime's reign of terror directed at COSATU and our struggling masses.

This was a time when to be elected as a leader meant going to your family and telling them to prepare for your funeral. Those who have not seen the video COSATU produce on John Gomomo must please find themselves a copy so they could hear Gomomo articulating what it meant to be an activist those days.

The resilience of our people and the working class in particular was best proven beyond any reasonable doubt during this period, when we saw the highest-ever number of COSATU-organised strikes and phenomenal growth in its membership.

In 1989, during the wave of the COSATU/UDF led defiance campaign, Comrade John Gomomo was elected as COSATU'S 2nd Deputy President and succeeded Elijah Barayi as President in 1991, a position he held until 1999. His experience as a union negotiator and a tried and tested militant leader fitted him ideally for these crucial leadership positions.

While COSATU president, he was an instrumental player in the CODESA negotiations leading to the transition in 1994. He led COSATU members in a march to CODESA to demand inclusion of more worker rights in the Constitution.

So today as we celebrate the fact that our Constitution enshrines the right to collectively bargain with the employers, to form and join unions of our choice, to strike and to negotiate union security agreements such as agency fee and closed shop, let's not forget that these were not given to us on a silver platter. These are victories of our common struggles led by the likes of John Gomomo, Jay Naidoo, and countless others.

He was the President during that period when the current labour market regime was negotiated. He led the campaign for the Labour Relations Act of 1995 and the Employment Equity Act of 1997 and others.

He graphically summed up labour's opposition to the government's reactionary Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy which he described it as "the reverse gear of our society".

He resolutely fought against trade and financial liberalisation, labour market deregulation, a limited role for the state, fiscal austerity, tight monetary policy, and central bank independence, as embraced by GEAR, echoed today in the economic sections of the NDP.

For this I know, just as you are witnesses, he took hard punches but all of his scars were on his forehead. He and his collective, which at the time included Sam Mbhazima Shilowa, were given all manner of labels such as ultra-left.

The worst was when others used the insult that he was once an informer of the Ciskei Bantustan police. This seriously hurt him and his self-confidence took a knock. He reluctantly agreed to go to parliament but he was a broken man. One day I will write about this chapter because in the recent past some tried to do this to me by circulating a bogus intelligence report accusing me of being an American agent.

Gomomo would have been deeply disturbed that today we face an unprecedented wave of strikes and community protests, because millions of South Africans feel they have been left out of the new South Africa, and that while they have human rights and political freedom, these have not been matched on the socio-economic front.

Gomomo was part of the leadership collective that was the brains behind the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). He understood that our struggle had to be centred on creating decent work, redistribution of income and power, industrial development, meeting basic needs, environmental sustainability and the development of Southern Africa, and would surely have agreed with us that at the heart of all these protests are the underlying problems of unemployment, inequality and corruption.

Comrade John understood that a struggle had to be waged to address the colonial and apartheid economy that dominated our society even after 1994. He was angered that the redistribution of wealth promised in 1994 had not happened and remained concerned that control of the economy and the means of production and power remained concentrated in white capitalist hands.

He would have been appalled that today, we are an even more unequal society, of which, in economic terms, and that the biggest beneficiaries of the two decades of democracy have been white monopoly capital rather than workers. While it is true that most of the poorest South Africans are less poor than before 1994, the richest South Africans are far better off, which has massively widened the wealth gap.

A survey of 296 executive directors in 83 companies across 14 sectors found the average remuneration of executives in 2012 at around R7.7m, while the earnings of chief executives climbed to an average of R11m. A low-wage earner would have to work 15 years to make what the average non-executive director would make in a year, but he would have to work 174 years to match the earnings of the executive director and 267 years to earn what the average chief executive is earning in a year.

Our attempts to make the second ten years of democracy a decade for the working class and the poor has largely failed. Redistribution continues to be from the poor working class to the rich, reflected in the falling share of workers in the GDP which is now below 50% and record breaking rates of profits and CEO world record beating remuneration levels.

Poverty remains widespread and food insecurity remains a major problem for 10 million South Africans. The property question remains unresolved, which is reflected not only by a mere 5% of black direct ownership of firms listed in the JSE but more importantly by the reality that those who owned the mineral wealth and land during the colonial and apartheid era largely remain the owners 20 years into our hard-won democracy.

This is not acceptable. This is what the ANC in its 1969 Morogoro Strategy and Tactics document referred to as feeding into the root cause of racial supremacy and representing not even a shadow of freedom.

This is the stark reality facing workers as we celebrate 20 years of democracy. Gomomo would have smiled listening to the debates about these issues at the 11th National Congress of COSATU held in 2012.

The notion of a second phase of radical economic transformation would have given him hope that the third decade of freedom will lead to the creation of a people's camp for radical economic transformation under the leadership of a reconfigured tripartite alliance that works not only as an election machine but as agent for fundamental transformation of society. This I believe remains the biggest task we face as this generation of leaders.

Following the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) in February 1990, Comrade John Gomomo was appointed to the ANC's Eastern Cape internal leadership core, and the SACP's internal leadership group. He was elected to the SACP's central committee at its December 1991 congress.

After leaving COSATU, he continued to serve the people as an ANC Member of Parliament and Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Public Service and Administration.

So as we approach the elections on 7 May, we should also remember that Comrade John Gomomo taught us to value the Alliance, which we formed with the ANC and SACP in order to crush apartheid and build a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa.

Gomomo would be telling the "nothing has changed brigade" that under ANC-led governments, workers have won important constitutional guarantees to which I have already referred.

Gomomo would have told us that notwithstanding the terrible economic climate the working class faces, they have also won concrete measures to improve our lives. He would have been unequivocal that certainly post-1994 is far better than pre-1994. He would back his argument by stating some of the facts that:

- People receiving social grants have increased from 3 million to 16 million.
- Over 3.3 million houses have been built, for more than 16 million people.
- About 12 million households have electricity, 7 million more than in 1994.

- Around 92% of South Africans have access to potable water, compared to 60% in 1996.

We have made tangible gains in industrial jobs. Motor vehicle exports increased from almost nothing in 1995 to 239 465. Through the Clothing and Textiles Competitiveness Programme, government has stopped the employment decline in the sector and helped to create of more than 12 505 permanent jobs. Through government incentives more than 61 376 jobs have been and created more than 8180 new decent sustainable in companies which received government incentives.

He would have praised the ANC led government for these advances. But I believe John Gomomo would have insisted that we must judge our progress against our ideals reflected in many of our historic documents such as the Freedom Charter, the Morogoro Strategy and Tactics and the RDP.

Using these, he would have agreed that we should have been much further down the line after 20 years. An unemployment rate of 34.1% rate, combined with a rampant increase of atypical forms of work such as the use of enslaving labour brokers, casualisation and sub-contracting means we are moving further and further away from achieving the dream of decent work. Poverty and inequalities remain at crisis levels.

PJ would have told us that these conditions require an independent, militant and fighting, worker-controlled and democratic movement. This is the only way COSATU can remain relevant to workers. Workers will simply embrace new alternatives if COSATU ceases to be an independent and militant formation. Workers don't like sweetheart unions; they don't want unions reduced into conveyor belts or a club of 'yes mam, yes sir'!

That is all the more vital in a time like now, when we have to ensure that in the third democratic decade we achieve a fundamental transformation in our economy, and build a democratic, united, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa, in line with the Freedom Charter, and the concept of the national democratic revolution (NDR).

Another phenomenon that would have not made John Gomomo happy is the continuous importation of greed, survival-of-the-fittest and dog-eat-dog capitalist culture into our movement. This is what has led to spread of corruption and divisions.

Whilst the poor still live in poverty and squalor, we are producing too many greedy billionaires, who conspire to fix prices, and corrupt businesses, politicians and public officials who manipulate tenders to enrich their business interests.

The Public Protector's Nkandla report is just the latest exposure of outrageous profiteering by service providers, and gross maladministration by state officials and lack of oversight by political representatives.

So while continuing to support our allies, COSATU should never stop speaking honestly about the state of the working class 20 years into our celebrated democracy. Like Comrade John Gomomo we must never be threatened into silence when we see the triumph of individualism and selfishness amongst the leadership and membership of our formations.

One of PJ's passions was that of building a strong and vibrant organisation. We can also learn important lessons from Comrade John Gomomo when we address our internal organisational problems. He believed strongly in building shop stewards as the rock upon which the trade unions had to be based. He was a strong advocate of worker control.

He understood the danger of worker leaders with no capacity who only sit in committees to ensure that they sign the attendance register so that they can receive the stipend. He would have shared our concern at the growth of social distance between some union leaders and officials from the members they were elected to represent

The best way to remember comrade John Gomomo today is to remember that we must never compromise the struggle of the workers for perks promised by the employer or by a possibility of being appointed into government positions. The unions must not be seen as political trampolines from which to jump to positions in government or to open business opportunities for themselves or their families.

Someone who was so involved in uniting different unions and bring workers together in strong organisations would have wept at the divisions which have emerged recently, and would have done everything in his power to keep COSATU united, strong and worker-controlled.

He also well understood the relationship between community struggles and trade union struggles, when working with others to build civic structures in Uitenhage. Surely if comrade Gomomo was alive today he would have encouraged COSATU to continue working with progressive civil society formations. Our struggle is inescapably tied to their struggles.

We salute this great leader of our people who taught us that participation in the struggle has no price tag. We say thank you to comrade Gomomo for teaching us that we can win nothing without consciously building and strengthening the power base of our organisations.

Gomomo was essentially a democratic who believed in the supremacy of the organisation instead of individuals. Some of my friends from both the left and right and others who are just confused are expressing a view that I, as Zwelinzima Vavi, should distance myself from a decision taken by the majority at the COSATU CEC to mobilize workers to vote for the ANC in the coming elections.

I have already stated that I am not an individual but a General Secretary of all 19 COSATU affiliated unions and must be bound by the decisions taken by the collective even if I was not present as it is the case today. If I was to do the opposite then I would no longer be a General Secretary whose role must be to unite all COSATU unions. So those calling me a sell-out for stating this may just as well continue to call me names.

We want to pledge that as COSATU we will continue in the footsteps of this great leader. We will continue to build COSATU into a stronger and more formidable force that is feared and respected by the employers and capital and all those who are corrupt who thought our freedom meant a right to loot state resources.

Finally I urge you all to go the May Day rally tomorrow. Join the workers of the world in celebrating our victories, rededicating ourselves to the challenges ahead and remembering our working-class heroes and heroines like Comrade John Gomomo. Amandla!