

Zwelinzima Vavi notes to the NUMSA Launch of the Shop Stewards Elections 18 July 2015

We will forever be indebted to you the shop stewards of NUMSA for your immeasurable support in all of the seasons – you have been with us in the winter, and with us in the summer! You have proven to be amongst the most reliable friends in our collective journey towards the total emancipation of our people and the working class in particular. We all know that the task of true revolutionaries is to always be mindful of the needs of the working class, and to be prepared to fight with and for our class, 365 days a year. I salute you comrades for continuing to do just that! Viva NUMSA Shop Stewards Viva!

Today our country, and indeed the entire world, is revisiting the legacy of one of the colossal giants our struggle for freedom and democracy, Comrade Nelson Mandela. Everyday we should aspire to be as principled and disciplined as the generation of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Chris Hani, Harry Gwala, Mark Shope, and all those who put the struggle of our people on top of their agendas. Personal wealth and status were not important for these comrades, and it is worth remembering this selflessness when we look at the crop of politicians we have supposedly guiding our country today.

We also salute NUMSA for reminding us of the basic principles that underlie a democratic trade union movement. The launch of the elections of shop stewards is a corner stone of the type of trade unions we seek to build. We aspire to build democratic, independent, militant, class conscious and socialist oriented trade unions, answerable to their members. That's our understanding of what Joe Slovo referred to as the prime organ of workers.

We call on NUMSA members to exercise their democratic right to elect or not elect you! That's democracy! Those who have worked hard to carry the mandate of making NUMSA the spear in the hands of workers, who have fought to defend workers jobs, and improve working conditions and wages will be re-elected back to their positions and good luck to them. Those who have sought to use their positions to build a better life for themselves and who have ignored or betrayed their mandate we say, please *dedela abanye!*

Your history connects to many auspicious organisations from the past, including CNETU, SACTU, FOSATU and of course the very beginnings of COSATU. Your union has made an immense contribution to building COSATU into a globally respected federation which carried the traditions of its forbearers. Many regarded COSATU as the ideal union federation with all the essentials in place of a democratic, worker controlled, militant, socialist oriented, transformative, and internationalist federation firmly based on the international workers slogan – *an injury to one is an injury to all!* NUMSA has been one of the most consistent of our democratic and militant unions. You are the offspring of Vuyisile Mini and the generations of union leaders before and after him. You have produced outstanding activists, many of whom have never been in the limelight, but who worked tirelessly on behalf of our class. Again we salute all those, behind the scenes who have undertaken this essential work.

You have been dismissed from the federation that you built from its inception. But you are not alone in being dismissed. Scores of other leaders, shop stewards

and activists have been dismissed in other unions too. We have to reflect what this means for the future of a democratic, militant and socialist oriented trade unionism.

We want to offer a few thoughts on the unprecedented turmoil in COSATU.

This week saw 1700 delegates, which constitutes a large majority, endorsing the dismissal not only of 365 000 NUMSA members but thousands of others who have been purged in other unions. How can this happen, when it is obvious that more than ever we need a strong and united working class to fight the capitalist offensive being waged against us? Its time to reflect on this phenomenon.

Many of the leaders of the nine who have tirelessly and gallantly fought to return COSATU back to its roots, believed that the workers will once again rise as they did in 2012 to reject the divisions and factionalism promoted by the current leadership, in favour of advancing the resolutions of the 2012 Congress that are even more relevant today than when they were passed. They had hoped that the same tsunami of support for a progressive way forward would capture the spirit of the 2500 delegates attending the Special National Congress.

But this optimism is frankly misplaced. Those who were punished in 2012 for trying to factionally direct the Congress have refined their approach, and spent hours and hours behind the scenes making sure that would never happen again. This is why we must analyse what has happened to COSATU in the past five years, so that these shocking events never happen again.

Let us attempt to summarise this now. It is something that we will expand on in the coming weeks and months. What is different between 2012 and 2015?

1. Firstly, the biggest affiliate of COSATU was dismissed to be replaced by NEHAWU as the largest in the Federation, which mainly organises public servants. The second biggest is SADTU and of course POPCRU which is also larger than most of the manufacturing unions. This was not the case in 1985. We had fought hard to build class unity between the industrial proletariat and workers in the public sector.

We have to acknowledge that these two sectors, the public and the private, have been impacted upon differently by the first twenty years of our capitalist democracy. The industrial proletariat have been on the coal face of a brutal, exploitative capitalist system. They have been casualised and outsourced, wages have been mercilessly suppressed to the point that now the gap between the highest and lowest paid is between R1700 and 2300 in the private sector. Public sector workers have had their wages suppressed and they too have been outsourced but you cannot compare the two experiences. Public sector workers have been spared the worst excesses of super exploitation, and though they have had to fight, their experiences have been very different to workers in the private sector. As the public sector has expanded, the manufacturing sector has been reduced by neoliberal policies advanced, and this helps to explain why our federation is now dominated by public sector workers.

With these considerations in mind, we must analyse whether our political education has truly increased the class consciousness of both sectors to

understand that notwithstanding the different material conditions at the end of the day, all workers have a responsibility to build a united force for a socialist future.

2. In 2012 most unions were still vibrant with entrenched democratic traditions, although there were signs of stagnations, and of bureaucratisation, meaning that workers control was being diluted. We cannot say the same in 2015. The systematic purges in too many COSATU unions have severely weakened and in some cases killed that culture and replaced it with culture of fear and authoritarianism. Here are just a few examples :
 - a) SAMWU has expelled nearly 160 of its most effective and politically mature cadre from provincial, regional and branch leaderships together with talented staff members for merely demanding a forensic audit after allegations emerged that a R132 million have gone missing in the union accounts. Not a single comrade was given a hearing! COSATU could not intervene because it is itself divided. This is unprecedented in the history of COSATU. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress. They are forming a new Union based on the principles that SAMWU has wilfully abandoned.
 - b) POPCRU dismissed comrades even before the 2012 congress. Its Vice President, Ntombizakhe Mcaba did not even get a hearing. Scores of other shop stewards and leaders were expelled without a hearing. Courts have proven to be hopeless in defending those expelled. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress.
 - c) NUM, before its 2015 congress dismissed scores of its leaders often getting them dismissed in their workplaces as employees. Scores of union members have walked away in protest against this culture, to find a new home outside of the Federation and in other unions.
 - d) SATAWU is currently in turmoil. Scores of workers have been purged in the Western Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng, and in particular at PRASA and Transnet. The elective PEC in KZN was declared invalid because the POBs elected were not favoured by the national leadership. When the elective congress was reconvened, the same POBs were re-elected by the members, despite the attempted sabotage of national leaders! Court actions have not been effective in defending them. Those purged are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November Congress. SATAWU has not had a CEC since March 2014, and so all of these negative actions are done without any mandate whatsoever.
 - e) CEPPWAWU has not held a meeting of the NEC for four years. The term of the current leadership ended last year and there is not even a discussion about when the next congress will be. These undemocratic Leaders appointed their own delegates to the COSATU SNC. The COSATU CEC has not intervened, and has instead launched an attack against Department of Labour officials who have correctly intervened in terms of the law. Now even the Minister has sought to intervene in favour of the undemocratic leadership in what appears to be taking direct instructions from the COSATU CEC. The Minister is trying to

stop workers re-gaining control of their union in favour of strengthening bureaucratic and business unionist control of the union! So much for Government supporting free and independent unions!

- f) SADTU has disbanded its Eastern Cape province and scores of comrades have been purged in Gauteng, Free State, North West and KwaZulu Natal. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November Congress.
3. There is an active fragmentation taking place, and splinter unions are being established all over the place. These are the most known examples:
- I. AMCU has grown to at least 100 000 members at the expense of the NUM. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress.
 - II. SATAWU has split when its former President made allegations of corruption which some were to be proven correct with the recent conviction of former President Ezrom Mabyana. Today South National African Transport Union has taken over at SAA and is making inroads elsewhere. The FEDUSA union may just take over at Transnet. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress.
 - III. Splinter groups have emerged in POPCRU following the season of purges also centered around allegations of corruption. Even though these splinter groups did not succeed to dent the existing leadership, one thing is for sure: These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress.
 - IV. SADTU is currently splitting with SAPSU being created by its former President and other leaders. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November Congress.
 - V. SAMWU has also split following more than a dozen Court battles that have not produced any results for those who thought they can win back the union. The leadership just ignored court rulings, and the mass meetings of members, and created parallel and sycophantic replacements! We now have the best activists in SAMWU in another Union! These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress.
 - g) SASBO is equally facing its own turmoil after the purging of its dismissed Assistant General Secretary. A new union is being formed. These comrades are gone! They were not in the Special National Congress and will not be in the November congress.

Whether we like it or not, we have to ask whether a new federation is in the process of being born. Is this a new COSATU arising from the ashes of the once proud and mighty COSATU of Elijah Barayi, Jay Naidoo and many other stalwarts? This new federation has no qualms of dismissing 365 000 workers from its ranks. It sees nothing wrong when its affiliates purge thousands of its members without a hearing, and disobeying its own rules and the law of the land. It says nothing when members march and send memorandums to it about the looting of millions of rands of members money. It says nothing about the looting

of taxpayer's money and yet it jumps into action and issues statements when their influential friends in high places are dismissed or purged as we see with the dismissal of the PRASA CEO.

Tragically the ANC and the SACP do not see this picture. They do not want to see this picture! All they seem to care about is what will remain in this new undemocratic COSATU that can continue to serve as voting fodder. The ANC and the SACP have lost any moral authority to intervene and solve these challenges. COSATU has been domesticated in the same way the ANCYL was. All dissenting voices are seen as a threat, not as a positive contribution to arriving at solutions for our people, but as a direct threat to those who are simply enjoying wielding power, and enjoying the material advantages associated with it. That is the truth, and we challenge anyone to contradict this view.

As we speak the chapter nine institutions in particular the Public Protector is under immense pressure and a full frontal attack. Other critical institutions of democracy are being blunted and domesticated. The State Owned Enterprises are going through one crisis after another and endless turmoil. All this forms part of an overall strategy to emasculate the organs of people's power and institutions of democracy. Comrades, unless we are very careful, and take action now, we seem to be marching towards a kleptocratic and predatory capitalist system where there will be no accountability and where corruption will be the norm.

Those who say the march against corruption on the 19 August is a middle class concern are totally wrong. It is the poor and the working class who suffer most from corruption, and they have to be in the forefront of fighting it. Those who disagree are simply trying to save their own vested interests! It is the working class more than any other class in society that has a primary responsibility to stop this slide into the abysses. Only the working class can confront a capitalist crisis and use its power to fight for socialist alternatives.

This is a reality we face comrades. We cannot allow ourselves to be lulled into a false sense of security that everything will come good all by itself. We have to fight, consciously, imaginatively, fearlessly to rebuild a workers movement that reaches out to the 7 million workers who are not organised. That speaks to the 170 plus unions that are currently outside of any federation. We have to provide a home for those good comrades who have decided that the only way forward is to create new democratic unions that fight for their members. We have eventually to reach out to all existing formations in the labour movement and persuade them that we can work together despite our historical and organisational cultural differences. We have to rebuild linkages with civil society, and reject the notion that organisations of civil society are our enemies or are middle class orientated. Say that to the hundreds of thousands of TAC activists from our poorest communities who fought a Government HIV/AIDS denialism. Say that to the thousands of students who have fought for proper sanitation in schools, say that to the hundreds of thousands who have fought open battles against corrupt councillors for decent service delivery! Are these middle class concerns. Its time some comrades who are supposed to be socialists woke up and smelled the coffee!

We have to raise the banner of class unity, and not be distracted by xenophobia, or any other of the divisive tactics that the ruling class uses to separate us. And not just the ruling class. Even some of those who are supposed to be on the left will try and divide us for their own purposes! There are leading communists today who are celebrating the expulsion of 350,000 metal workers from COSATU, and the dismissal of the Federations General Secretary. That's how far some of these comrades have travelled away from a socialist and a working class agenda. Of course, history will judge all of us comrades.

Over the next few months, we are going to step up the campaign to give workers back their voice, against corruption, against labour brokers, against casualisation, against poverty wages, against cuts in public services, against massive inequalities, and against the social evils of violence against women and children.

We are going to be organising Workers Summits in every province, and then a massive National Workers Summit. We are going to rebuild this movement, and no one will stop us because it has to be done for our class, and by our class.

Comrades, it is deeply reassuring to know that here today, and across the country, NUMSA shop stewards will be ready to be part of this revival. The working class maybe on the defensive comrades, it may even be divided in some places, but it is certainly not defeated. We have a chance, if we act together now to rebuild workers power, and still make sure that the capitalist class, and their defenders have sleepless nights! Remember, our dream is their nightmare! Lets make it happen!