

COSATU has been stolen by the state!

23 July 2015

The nine unions who two years ago called for the COSATU Special National Congress (SNC) are appalled at the way the Congress - which was finally held on 13-14 July 2015 - was rigged by the federation's leadership in order to crush workers' right to express their views and to force through decisions which we believe are killing the mighty federation of Elijah Barayi.

For 30 years COSATU was a powerful, militant, democratic, worker-controlled fighting force of the South African working class, admired throughout the world. But that federation is now dead, murdered by a leadership which has reduced it into a paralysed, disunited and feeble shadow of its former self.

From the moment it was called, the SNC was manipulated to ensure that any attempts to discuss the crisis facing COSATU and to reverse the expulsion of its biggest affiliate NUMSA and General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, were prevented.

Delegates from the unions represented here today fought gallantly to challenge the credentials report and to include important items in the agenda – the right of NUMSA and Zwelinzima Vavi to appeal against their expulsions, the exclusion of the unconstitutionally appointed 2nd Deputy President, Zingiswa Losi and the reversal of the CEC decision to allow LIMUSA to affiliate despite not having a constitution approved by a National Congress.

The debate on credentials took between 9 and 10 hours, centred around the issues of Losi and Limusa on the one hand, and Numsa and Vavi on the other. When the two motions persisted, and NUM's '3rd-way' intervention was thrown out of the window, the Presiding Officer, Tyoty James, ruled for a vote.

After this ruling, another debate ensued on how the vote should be conducted. There were two motions: one for a show of hands and another for a secret ballot. However Tyoty James ruled that it would be by show of hands.

This decreed ruling was made with no reference to the constitution or past practice on voting. Not even in the CECs was there a vote by a show of hands even in the last few months of voting fever.

Worse still, a gentleman said to be from the Independent Electoral Commission, who was not even introduced by the table or by himself, was called to conduct the voting process. He could have been a stranger or a passerby.

The voting question was unclear - how to cast a vote (Stand for Yes, Sit down for No and show crossed-hands for Abstain) was a joke.

During voting, some were standing, even on chairs and tables and others singing and chanting.

Empty chairs were calculated but unclear if it was for abstaining or even Yes or No.

Scrutinizers were COSATU staff.

The voting process was on credentials and technically the meeting may have not started and/or a quorum formed at that time. This may be unconstitutional. Indeed the voting amounted throwing the constitution out of the window.

The results were announced, that 1752 delegates had voted to accept the credentials; congress adjourned for few minutes. Then there was another debate on the adoption of the agenda, with NUMSA and ZV issues at the centre, and this went on until the threat to vote was made and debates effectively suppressed by the table. This manipulated vote effectively endorsed the dismissal of not only of the General Secretary and 365 000 NUMSA members but indirectly of thousands of others who have been purged in other unions.

How could this have happened?

It happened because from the outset the Congress was manipulated to prevent any such challenge to the leadership.

Firstly the membership figures, on which affiliates' delegations were calculated, were increased to ensure disproportionate number for those unions backing the leadership. Then delegates were handpicked to ensure there would be a majority of loyal sycophants. 'Unreliable' delegates were ruthlessly weeded out.

SATAWU even pepper-sprayed delegates from four provinces and threw them out of their caucus meeting; some SATAWU members who made it to the Congress hall were ejected by security staff.

A political statement was only issued by the COSATU leadership a day before the Congress, giving the membership no opportunity to discuss it. The statement also contained a long section justifying the expulsion of NUMSA and Vavi, which severely prejudiced any appeal they would lodge.

Worst of all was the use of state officials to police the Congress and even conduct the ballot, which, unprecedentedly, was by a show of hands, an outrageous means to intimidate delegates, many of whom would have voted differently in a secret ballot, but knew the inevitable disciplinary action if they were seen to be taking an independent line.

Those factionalists who tried to manipulate COSATU's 11th national congress in 2012 and whom the delegates punished for what they were doing, have spent three years refining their approach, spending hours behind the scenes making sure that would never happen again.

And if the proposed 'normal' National Congress takes place in November there is sure to be a repeat performance of last week's pantomime. What we proudly used to call the 'Workers' Parliament' has been reduced to a stage-managed sham.

In fact it is now clear that the whole episode, which saw COSATU divided, emasculated and paralysed over a period of three years was engineered not only by the federation's current leaders but by the state, and its political representatives in the ANC and specifically the SACP, in order to turn it into an obedient appendage of the state.

It has been a capitalist class offensive aimed at dividing and weakening the organised working class. While the current COSATU leaders have been pawns in a much bigger conspiracy, though as willing accomplices they are no less guilty.

Its aim is in line with the neo-liberal free-market policies encapsulated in the National Development Plan, to enable white monopoly capital to get even richer by exploiting a weaker and more divided union movement so they can cut wages, outsource more jobs to labour brokers and thus increase their already massive profits.

In 2012 COSATU and most of its affiliated unions were still vibrant organisations with strong democratic traditions. Even then though here were already signs of stagnation and bureaucratisation, and workers' control was being diluted.

In 2015 however the systematic purges in the federation and many unions have severely weakened and sometimes killed that culture and replaced it with one of fear and authoritarianism. We have seen Stalinist purges, intimidation, control freaking, manipulation and micro-management of workers within some affiliates.

SAMWU has expelled nearly 160 of its most effective and experienced cadres from provincial, regional and branch leaderships, together with talented staff members for merely demanding a forensic audit after allegations that R132 million was missing in the union accounts. Not a single comrade was given a hearing! COSATU could not intervene because it is itself divided.

POPCRU dismissed comrades even before 2012. Its Vice President, Ntombizakhe Mcaba did not even get a hearing. Scores of other shop stewards and leaders were expelled without a hearing.

NUM, before its 2015 congress, dismissed scores of its leaders often getting them dismissed in their workplaces as employees. Many more have walked away in protest against this culture, to find a new home in other unions or none at all.

Scores of SATAWU members have been purged in the Western Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng, in particular at Prasa and Transnet. The elective PEC in KZN was declared invalid because the national leadership did not favour the elected POBs. SATAWU has not had a CEC since March 2014, and so all of these actions are done with no mandate whatsoever.

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 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, trying to stop workers re-gaining control of their union in favour of strengthening bureaucratic and business unionist control of the union!

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.

All this has led to a procession of breakaway unions, as workers who have been purged or become disillusioned with their leaders have formed new unions. AMCU has taken a huge slice of members from the NUM; DEMAWUSA is recruiting purged SAMWU members; SAPSU is building amongst public servants, particularly in the Eastern Cape. FUWO has been formed by former members of the Finance Union, SASBO.

In addition there has been a dramatic shift in the sectors where most COSATU members now work. NUMSA, the biggest affiliate of COSATU, has been replaced by NEHAWU, which organises public servants. The second biggest is SADTU, and POPCRU is also larger than most of the manufacturing unions. This was not the case in 1985 when we fought hard to build class unity between the industrial workers and those in the public sector.

As the public sector has expanded, the manufacturing sector has been reduced by deindustrialisation. Public sector workers now dominate the federation.

These two sectors have been impacted upon differently. Industrial workers have faced a brutal, exploitative capitalist system, with jobs casualised and outsourced and wages mercilessly suppressed. Public sector workers too have had to fight for decent wages and jobs have been outsourced but their experiences have been very different.

But the biggest challenge, which, scandalously, the current divisions have failed to address, is that 76% of workers are unorganised, most of them in the most vulnerable sectors.

And the 24% of organised workers are fragmented among 23 registered labour federations and 179 registered trade unions. We are nowhere near the goal of One Country – One Federation and indeed are moving in the opposite direction.

Our over-riding priority must be to take up the fight for a strong, militant and united workers' movement. That is why we have resolved to convene soon a Workers Summit, to which we shall invite the broadest possible number of independent, representative workers' federations and unions, including COSATU and all its affiliated members.

We shall hold meetings at workplace and local meetings, followed by Provincial Summits leading to a national Workers Summit in September or October.

Workers are itching to fight back against the super-exploitation they are facing, the intolerable 36.1% level of unemployment, 54% of people suffering from poverty getting and 14 million of our people going to bed every night without food.

That is why we urgently need the Summit - to rebuild the movement that COSATU once was, only much bigger and more effective, which will unite the workers of South Africa. No one will stop us because it has to be done for our class, and by our class.

Meanwhile we are mobilising for the mass marches against corruption on 19 August, when thousands of South Africans will be flooding the streets of Pretoria and other cities in protest against the epidemic of corruption, which is spreading like a plague in both the public and private sectors.

Corruption is diverting billions of Rands away from the delivery of public services to the poor and into hands of a greedy parasitic elite, making the already desperate crisis of unemployment and poverty, and collapsing public services even worse.

Chapter Nine institutions, in particular the Public Protector, are under a full frontal attack. State Owned Enterprises are going through one crisis after crisis. Unless we take action now, we will sink into a kleptocratic and predatory capitalist system where no-one will be accountable and where corruption will be routine.

It is infecting our trade union movement and is indeed one of the reasons for the collapse of COSATU as positions are contested not on the basis of who can best serve the workers but who can gain access to investment companies' profits.

And it is the poor and the working class who suffer most from corruption, and they have to be in the forefront of fighting it. 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.

The ruling class has stolen COSATU and many of its affiliates. We must now reclaim its proud traditions and build a new vehicle to carry forward the revolutionary struggle for workers' right and socialism.