

**Trapped in Corporatism? Trade Union Linkages to the Abahlali
BaseMjondolo Movement in Durban.**

Table Of Contents

| | Page |
|--|-------------|
| Abstract | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Chapter One Methodology | 7 |
| Chapter Two COSATU and Neoliberal Corporatism in South Africa | 10 |
| Chapter Three Abahlali BaseMjondolo's Challenge to Contemporary Governance in South Africa | 24 |
| Chapter Four Towards A United Struggle? | 47 |
| Chapter Five Conclusion | 82 |
| Bibliography | 86 |
| Appendix | 91 |

Abstract

This paper seeks to identify the relationship between the COSATU trade unions in Durban and the shack dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. It will outline how COSATU has been absorbed into a strategy of cooperating in corporatist structures and what implications this has. It will be argued that COSATU has not been able to reap the concessions it had hoped for from such arrangements and has been unable to exert the level of influence over the ANC that would allow it to guide a project for social transformation through the Alliance. The case study in Durban analyses the trade union attitudes towards the Abahlali movement and assesses whether trade union responses indicate that COSATU is trapped in a one-dimensional strategy of cooperation in corporatist governance. It also considers whether this has precluded COSATU from exploring linkages with groups like Abahlali that offer radical agendas for transforming South African society.

Introduction

I will be investigating the relationship between COSATU trade unions in Durban and a local social movement called Abahlali baseMjondolo (informal shack dwellers, hereafter Abahlali) that has emerged in the shack settlements of Durban. The aim is to explore the attitudes of trade unionists in the Durban area towards the movement and to uncover whether COSATU unions believe that cooperation with the Abahlali movement is desirable. By focusing on this relationship, I will examine some of the wider connotations that such attitudes have for COSATU's relationship with social movements and the implications this has for COSATU's role in contemporary South African politics.

The first chapter will give a brief account of my methodology. This will detail how my data was generated and will also assess the limitations of the study. It will be argued that whilst the sample size was restricted, the data gathered was sufficient to produce a snap-shot of attitudes and was sufficient to conduct my analysis.

Chapter two will outline how COSATU has been absorbed into a neoliberal corporatist arrangement between itself, the government and big business. I will explore the reasons why COSATU has adopted a strategy of cooperating in corporatists institutions. This, I will explain, must be understood in the context of the historic role COSATU played in the liberation movement and its Alliance with the ANC and also because of the balance of global political forces and the priority of securing the

democratic transition. Most importantly, cooperating in corporatist structures allows COSATU to influence government policy and thus gain concessions for its members. It also enables it to attempt to channel the ANC's political trajectory into a redistributionalist framework. However, in the wake of the ANC's adoption of neoliberal development strategies, I will argue that COSATU has been unable to fulfill its objectives. Although it has been able to make limited gains for its members, it has adopted a defensive strategy of protecting its members by contesting policy within the neoliberal paradigm. This chapter will set the context for a later discussion of the attitudes of unionists in Durban. It argues that such is the embedded logic of corporatist strategies at a national level that COSATU unions are expected to exude revolutionary discipline and reject cooperation with groups deemed illegitimate by the ANC government. It will later be argued that such a logic pervades at a local level, a fact that will be explored with respect to attitudes towards the Abahlali movement in Durban. The implications of this is that COSATU is following a blinkered strategy of cooperating within corporatist structures and that this has left it blind to alternative strategies. The later chapter on Durban attitudes to Abahlali highlight the inability of unionists to conceive of struggles outside of the corporatist strategy that permeates from the national level.

Chapter three will discuss the Abahlali struggle and outline the manner in which communities in the shack settlements are marginalised from politics at a local level. I will discuss what the aims and tactics of this movement have been and what implications this has for a serious challenge to neoliberal governance strategies in South Africa. This

group, it is argued, present a radical alternative strategy that is not mired in corporatist logic and could present COSATU with a valuable partner if it sought to mount an offensive oppositional strategy to the neoliberal trajectory of the ANC government rather than simply defending worker privilege *within* the neoliberal framework.

The fourth chapter will focus on the responses of trade unionists in Durban. I will firstly outline their attitudes towards community movements in general and explore how these have changed since the community-organising strategies of the 1980s. I will also explore the attitudes towards the unemployed and investigate whether the unions were interested in committing to campaigns for a broader working class beyond its membership base or whether they were more focused on protecting the interests of their members. I will discuss the attitudes shown by those that I had contact with, explaining that there was an extremely suspicious sentiment that prevailed amongst the unionists towards the Abahlali movement. I will examine the concern that the unionists had over the funders and why they thought that the Abahlali was being manipulated by external forces. This forced the unions to be extremely wary of cooperating Abahlali as they felt that the movement was anti-ANC. I will explain that such suspicions are unfounded and I will argue that this reactionary attitude is a severe impediment to the unions linking with such groups. I will then analyse how the unionists misconceived the goals of Abahlali, conceiving it in technocratic terms as a single-issue campaign for housing. This conception, I will argue, fails to recognise the broad appeal of the Abahlali campaign to challenge the governance strategy of the local government. I will explain that the failure to accurately comprehend the purpose of the Abahlali struggle is indicative of

COSATU's defensive, damage-limitation strategy towards opposing neoliberalism. This strategy is restricted to what they perceive as the only "legitimate" organisational strategy, namely demanding small gains from within neoliberal corporatist structures and distancing themselves from groups that operate outside the confines of corporatist structures. It also dictates that groups must fight to win small material gains from the state by working *within* the state structures provided. This is symptomatic of COSATU's inability to conceive of radical oppositional strategies, both tactically and ideologically.

Chapter One

Methodology

My methodology was primarily based on interviews of trade unionists and informal discussions and observations at gatherings such as the May Day rally in Durban. The sample size was extremely restricted yet it covered a range of levels within the unions, from shop stewards to those at the higher leadership levels such as the Regional Chairperson for KwaZulu Natal. The interviews also covered educators at the workers college who were responsible for educating shop stewards, giving them political tutoring and various other training for their roles in the union. They had regular contact with many of the unionists in Durban and were thus a useful barometer of attitudes amongst unionists. Despite the limited sample size, I believe that the responses that I gained were nonetheless useful and whilst the sample could only present a snap shot, it did yield some interesting results for analysis. Some of the issues raised, such as attitudes towards the Tripartite Alliance, drew responses that were uniform and could therefore be said to represent the prevailing attitude of those unionists I had contact with. On other issues there was a divergence in responses. However, rather than trying to go with the majority sentiment at such times I have analysed the range of responses in order to highlight how this is indicative of the misconceptions of the Abahlali movement, in terms of its aims and its political purpose. Although, as I have already acknowledged, my sample size was extremely limited, I do believe that this snap-shot of union attitudes did reveal some

important insights into the current trajectory of trade union activity in Durban and that this has some implications for COSATU at a national level.

My research on the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement consisted of an in-depth interview with the President of Abahlali, Sbu Zikode, who was able to offer some important insights into the movement and its attitudes towards trade union linkages, in particular. I supplemented this by adopting a research strategy of participant-observation, attending meetings and the UnFreedom Day campaign to observe the workings and practice of the movement in action. It also offered me the chance to speak to several of the people who attended the event in order to hear their perceptions of what was happening. Attending the movement's meetings allowed me to witness first-hand the practice of decision-making and the organisational culture of Abahlali. I was able to see how decisions were reached and how the commitment to democracy in the movement was put into practice. My e mail interview with Mike Sutcliffe, the City Manager, also allowed me to gain a valuable insight into how the City represents its slum clearance project, and I was able to contrast this with the experiences that Abahlali members have claimed to have. I have tried to document details of the claims that both sides have made and have attempted to highlight the disparity between the rhetoric of the City and what those in the Abahlali movement claim to be the lived experiences of the City's "participatory democracy".

During this chapter, particularly when examining the Abahlali movement I will quote heavily from members of the movement because, as will be explained, the struggle is about setting up a radical new politics in South Africa, not one couched in technocratic “specialist” terms or that of an academic tradition. I will do my best to present their struggle in their own words without extracting it and applying it to some abstract theory, because their struggle is about reclaiming South African politics and respect for those in the shack settlements. I will also quote heavily from the activist/researchers who know them best.

Chapter Two

COSATU and Neoliberal Corporatism in South Africa

Introduction

This chapter will assess how COSATU has been inserted into the ANC's governance strategy in contemporary South Africa. I will explore how COSATU has been absorbed into a corporatist mode of governance that is informed not simply by examples from abroad, but also by the logic of a liberation movement and the historical relationship between itself and the ANC. It is argued that because of its historical attachment to the ANC, COSATU has been willing to subordinate its interests to the ANC's national development project. This is, however, also out of self-interest because COSATU has benefited from corporatist arrangements that allow it a degree of influence over policy that enables it to protect the interests of its members. COSATU also sees its position within the Tripartite Alliance between itself, the ANC and the SACP as the only means through which to pursue its project for the National Democratic Revolution (NDR).

The second section will argue that as the ANC pursues its commitment to national development it has, as mentioned in the previous chapter, become increasingly centralized and averse to dissent within the Alliance as it pursues the neoliberal

development strategy outlined in GEAR (the government's Growth Employment and Redistribution plan). This neoliberal shift has fundamentally altered the balance of forces within the corporatist structures as business has been able to make its interest synonymous with the ANC's development strategy. The influence of COSATU has thus been curtailed. Catchpowle and Cooper argue that the form of corporatism in South Africa represents neoliberal corporatism which aims to ensure acceptance of neoliberal, free market policies on the part of trade union leadership.¹ It will be argued that although cooperation in government is not necessarily a negative strategy, COSATU's involvement in neoliberal corporatism diminishes its ability to assert real influence. This has resulted in COSATU adopting a reformist, damage-limitation strategy towards opposing neoliberal initiatives in order to pursue the best solutions for its members *within* the neoliberal paradigm.

¹ Catchpowle, Lesley and Cooper, Christine "Neoliberal Corporatism: Origins and Implications for South Africa" in Bramble, Tom (ed) p.14

Neoliberal Corporatism in South Africa

Following the democratic transition in South Africa COSATU became involved in a corporatist mode of governance that aimed at solving disputes between itself and business through mediation rather than adversarialism. Panitch describes corporatism as “a political system within advanced capitalism which integrates organised socio-economic groups through a system of representation and cooperative mutual interaction at the leadership level and mobilisation and social control at the mass level”.² This usually entails a formal tripartite commitment by labour, capital and the state to work together in an attempt to smooth over conflicts of interest through negotiation in order to ensure social stability and the uninterrupted running of the economy. Catchpowle and Cooper claim that it is not just an institutional commitment, it is political, and that it entails “the voluntary subordination of sectional or class interest to the requirement of the ‘national interest’. The institutionalisation of trade unions, inherent in any corporate strategy, *works as a mechanism of social control*, and aims at integrating a section of the working class into capitalist society.”³ Essentially these corporatist arrangements seek to pacify the

² Catchpowle, Lesley and Cooper, Christine op. cit., p.14

³ *ibid.*, p.14

organised working class by allowing it a modicum of influence in exchange for the unions accepting capitalist relations as the status quo. This militates against Marxist understandings of class warfare being the motor of history and that class antagonisms are fundamentally irreconcilable by offering competing class forces the opportunity to co-determine economic policy and, in theory, reach a compromise favourable for both sets of interests.⁴

From its founding in 1985, COSATU had consistently called for a socialist revolution as part-and-parcel of the overthrow of the apartheid government. However, Desai and Habib explored how during the transition period in the early nineteen nineties COSATU's demands for a socialist order became gradually curtailed in favour of mediation and compromise with capital in order to ensure the continuation of the transition process and to consolidate ANC rule thereafter.⁵ This change of tactic was the result of COSATU's involvement in the negotiating process with both business and with the old regime itself which emphasised the need for compromise rather than adversarial relations in order to secure both the transition and the new democratic order. As Desai and Habib have noted: "The emergence of a popularly-elected government in April 1994 was followed by the latter's immediate and continued assurance to local and international capital that their position was secure in the new South Africa. The labour movement responded to these changed conditions by adopting a discourse that emphasised 'social

⁴ Adam, Heribert et al *Comrades in Business: Post Liberation Politics in South Africa* (South Africa, Tafelberg, 1998) p.144

⁵ Desai, Ashwin and Habib, Adam "COSATU and the Democratic Transition in South Africa: Drifting Towards Corporatism? In *South Asia Bulletin: Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* Volume XV Number 1p.30

partnership’ rather than ‘takeover’ of the economy.”⁶ Adam et al have argued that despite left-wing critics of COSATU’s adoption of corporatist arrangements, there was little alternative for COSATU in the face of global economic pressures.⁷ Indeed, following the fall of the Soviet Union alternative strategies were de-legitimised by a new configuration of global forces intent on ensuring the ANC accept their doctrine of the need for market-friendly development policies.⁸ Faced with immediate pressing demands from its membership base for jobs, wages and improved living conditions plus demands for stability from new government, it is little wonder that so many labour analysts at the time supported corporatist arrangements.⁹

Corporatism might have been a desirable option for COSATU wanting to consolidate the position of the new government and bring immediate benefits to its members, and the same could also be said about business. Whilst during the transition period the balance of forces in the global economy certainly favoured capital over labour, COSATU was a well-organised union that had exerted considerable pressure on the previous apartheid economy through its militancy and it was now demanding to be heard. As one management consultant remarked during the transition period, “management will have to give up some of its control in order to keep it.”¹⁰ By allowing the working class to promote its interests within the institutional framework encourages it to pursue its

⁶ Ibid p.32

⁷ Adam, Heribert et al op. cit., p.140

⁸ For a more in-depth discussion of the ideological underpinnings of the transition period see Williams, Paul and Taylor, Ian “Neoliberalism and the Political Economy of the ‘New’ South Africa” in *New Political Economy*, Volume 5, Number 1 (2000) Peet, Richard “Ideology, Discourse, and the Geography of Hegemony: From Socialist to Neoliberal Development in Postapartheid South Africa” in *Antipode*, Volume 34 Number 1 (2002)

⁹ Desai, Ashwin and Habib, Adam (1995) op. cit., p.31 for a discussion of these analyses

¹⁰ Quoted in

interests in a disciplined, cooperative manner rather than an adversarial manner that could harm the economy as a whole.

The National-Liberation Context

COSATU's commitment to negotiated decision-making and a corporatist structure of governance is not merely predicated on an objective assessment of the scope to advance worker interests within such a governance framework, it is also powerfully influenced by COSATU's historical background as an alliance partner with the ANC and its commitment to pursue the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in Alliance with the ANC. Since 1989 COSATU has recognised the ANC as the leader of the Alliance and figurehead of national liberation, a position continuously reaffirmed by the ANC leadership today.¹¹ In this respect, the ANC is careful to utilise emotive discourse of the struggle years and the 'national interest' in order to command discipline from both COSATU officials and its members.

Dorman argues that "the lasting impacts of liberation struggles are found not in the post-liberation institution building, but in relationships and alliances formed during

¹¹ See Buhlungu, Sakhele "From 'Madiba Magic' to 'Mbeki Logic': Mbeki and the ANC's Trade Union Allies" in Jacobs, Sean and Calland, Richard (eds) *Thabo Mbeki's World: The Politics and Ideology of the South Africa President* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002) and Johnson, Krista "State and Civil Society in Contemporary South Africa: Redefining the Rules of the Game" in Jacobs, Sean and Calland, Richard (eds) *Thabo Mbeki's World: The Politics and Ideology of the South Africa President* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 2002)

those difficult years.”¹² Continuities can be traced between the relationship between COSATU and the ANC during the liberation struggle and in their contemporary relationship. Buhlungu asserts that the prerogatives of a movement in exile and the demand for deference to the ANC as leader of the alliance, and the call to display “revolutionary discipline” are still strong amongst ANC leaders: “Their instrumental approach to unions – the ‘transmission belt’ approach, which was prevalent in the collapsed socialist countries in eastern Europe and in developing countries – has remained highly influential among activists and leaders.”¹³ The unions are expected to play a “transmission belt” role, maintaining the discipline of its members and shaping responsibility for the ANC’

Buhlungu believes that what can now be witnessed is a change from the more inclusive politics of the Mandela presidency or “Madiba magic”, where there was an effort to accommodate the concerns of the unions so that they would cooperate; towards “Mbeki logic” where Mbeki does not simply offer cooperation but he *demand*s it.¹⁴ Mbeki has recently declared that: “*Constructive engagement* in the continuing, difficult and complex struggle to advance the objectives it [the liberation movement] has set for the nation is what will define, in the masses of our people, who is a genuine representative of these masses, and who is merely a pretender.”¹⁵ Members of the liberation movement are required to not simply “critique” or “demand that the government deliver”; it is expected that they remain disciplined and continue to engage

¹² Rich Dorman, Sara “Post-liberation Politics in Africa: Examining the political legacy of struggle” *Third World Quarterly* volume 27, issue 6 (forthcoming Sept 2006) p.13

¹³ Buhlungu, Sakhele (I) p.183

¹⁴ Ibid p.193

¹⁵ Mbeki, Thabo *ANC Today* <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/anctoday/index.html>

constructively with the government and that they must not “remain content to reap the fruits of the revolution, determined to make no contribution to the growth of these fruits.”¹⁶ Mbeki’s approach is perhaps the most striking example of a “transmission belt” mentality towards the unions. COSATU unions are expected to accept the directives of the COSATU leadership and defer to the leadership of the ANC. This involves cooperating in the national development strategy and relinquishing the idea that the ANC, as a government representing the ‘national interest’, can simply pursue the ‘selfish’ or ‘sectional’ interests of the labour unions.¹⁷

The most striking example of the ANC’s determination to proceed with its agenda in the face of union opposition was the adoption of GEAR that has been the hallmark of ANC economic policy. Mandela stated at the time of its launch that; “There are matters on which we [the alliance partners] will agree. The second category is matters where we disagree among us, but compromise. The third category is where there is no agreement at all and the government will go on with its policy.”¹⁸ COSATU’s major grievance was that it was left to deal only with the *product* of the ANC government’s policy rather than directly affecting the ideological direction of the policy agenda.¹⁹ Neoliberal corporatism insulates politics from popular scrutiny, even from those within the corporatist structures, and assigns COSATU a role in mediating social disputes whilst ensuring the discipline of its members in order to facilitate the government’s development strategy.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Johnson, Krista op. cit., p.227

¹⁸ Quoted in Buhlungu, Sakhele (II) “Union-Party Alliances in the Era of Market Regulation: The Case of South Africa” *Journal of Southern African Studies* Volume 31, Number 4 (2005) p.710

¹⁹ Eidelberg, P.G The Tripartite Alliance on the Eve of the New Millenium: COSATU, the ANC and the SACP” in Adler, Glenn et al (ed) *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997* (Basingstoke, MacMillan 2000)

Neoliberal Corporatism: Sapping COSATU's Strength?

It should be noted that COSATU voluntarily subordinates itself to ANC leadership. This is because, as mentioned above, it sees cooperation in Alliance corporatism as the best strategy for protecting its members interests and furthering its goal of social transformation through the NDR. However, this has caused COSATU to become embedded in the *logic of corporatism* in South Africa. This logic entails the voluntary deferment of working class interests to those of capital in order to facilitate the government's development programme whilst practicing discipline with regard to industrial action and accepting responsibility for the growth of the economy as a whole. COSATU adheres to this arrangement because it still believes the Alliance is the only means through which to protect its members interests and influence policy. It is this same logic and the very nature of the *neoliberal* corporatist arrangement that is disempowering COSATU.

There is clearly a widespread feeling amongst COSATU officials of marginalisation within the alliance structure and that COSATU is being left out in the cold when it comes to determining the economic policy direction of the government. Buhlungu has argued that in South Africa we witness a shift from "social regulation"

towards “market regulation” of the economy as the ANC shifted from the social-democratic RDP towards the neoliberal policies of GEAR. As such, she argues, unions have the been decreasingly able to influence government policy as the market is prioritised as the primary vehicle for development.²⁰ The trade unions have had to forward their demands *within* the neoliberal paradigm rather than in opposition to it.

Cooperation with state institutions need not necessarily mean COSATU “selling out” or diverting from its pursuit of socialism. Appolis believes that cooperation provided a “launch pad for further forays into the territory of the enemy”.²¹ Appolis notes that cooperation and reform should not be viewed as an end in themselves but that they should be used as just one tactic to advance what he sees as the “protracted trench warfare” of class struggle. He states that “It is not so much the struggle for reform that is reformist but rather how reforms are viewed and where they are located in the struggle for socialism. When reforms are seen as ends in themselves and not means to an end then we have classic reformism.”²² COSATU does not need to follow a dichotomy between strategies of cooperation and disengagement, so long as the overall objective of radical social transformation is not surrendered to a reformist logic. Reforms in legislation such as the Labour Relations Act (LRA) should be celebrated as temporary successes and the means with which to gradually increase working class control over both state institutions and the work place. These reforms complement the strategy of social revolution, they do not preclude it; cooperation must not become the sole strategy, with small reforms its

²⁰ Buhlungu, Sakhele (II) op. cit.,

²¹ Appolis, John “The Registration Debate and Participation in Industrial Councils” in *Left Movements and Participation in Bourgeois Institutions* (Khanya College Publishing, 2006) p.17

²² Ibid p.17

only goal – it must be pursued in parallel with alternative strategies for furthering radical transformation.

COSATU is committed to corporatism because of its historic link to the ANC in the Alliance and its commitment to further social transformation through the Alliance and the newly-won democratic state apparatus. It is also committed to corporatism in order to secure short-term concessions for its membership. There is a continued commitment to the Alliance structure as the best means through which to deliver the NDR. However, COSATU fails to recognise the nature of the neoliberal corporatist strategy in which it has become embroiled and has adopted a *defensive*, reform-minded strategy that seeks to secure short term concessions at the expense of an *offensive* strategy for social transformation. Whilst it is right to cite the democratic nature of the South African state and the opportunities that this now offers for cooperation, COSATU has taken this too far and have made participation a matter of principle which has fundamentally failed to recognise the class character of the (neoliberal) state. As Appolis states, “It sees participation in the plethora of bourgeois institution as a matter of common sense, not to be questioned.”²³ Although COSATU sees democratic institutions as a way to further their socialist ideal through the NDR, cooperation in neoliberal institutions has been born at too greater cost as working class interests have been subordinated to the prerogatives of ‘market friendly’ legislations and the maintenance of “business confidence” and this has reduced COSATU’s demands to transformist logic *within* the neoliberal paradigm instead of in opposition to it. Both the advancement of its strategy of pursuing social transformation through the Alliance and advancing the interests of its members and

²³ Ibid p.21

gaining them immediate concessions are threatened by neoliberal corporatism because COSATU's influence in such structures is being gradually eroded.²⁴

A fundamental tenet of neoliberal governance is that whilst competing 'stakeholders' might vie for influence in order to affect small changes, this cannot supersede the priority of 'market friendly' policies. 'Stakeholders' like COSATU can affect change but only within the parameters of neoliberalism. Because the parameters of macroeconomic debate are set outside of forums such as NEDLAC, rather than addressing the policy direction of the ANC directly, COSATU is forced to accept the neoliberal policy agenda and is often left to deal with simply making adjustments to, or implementing policy rather than debating its initial content. Whilst neoliberal discourse might evoke the idea of "partnership", such partnerships are highly unequal in terms of the ability of some partners to influence policy. Under neoliberalism that prioritises, above all else, the sanctity of "business confidence", COSATU will always be a junior partner. This process, however, should not cast COSATU as the victim of forces beyond its control since the subordination of COSATU came about largely because of its *voluntary* deference to the prerogatives of the 'national interest' and its continued affirmation that Alliance corporatism is the best means to further both the interests of its members and the NDR. This is coupled with its own inability to maintain powerful links with community struggles and the strategy of social movement unionism, as will be discussed later.

²⁴ Buhlungu Sakhele (II) op. cit., and Webster, Eddie "The Alliance Under Stress: Governing in a Globalizing World" in *Democratization*, Volume 8, Number 1 (2001)

Lehulere has examined a gradual three-period shift in COSATU's ideological standpoint towards the right: "These three periods represent a steady evolution by the federation in its economic strategy from a socialist position to a right-wing Keynesianism."²⁵ Through her analysis of COSATU documents, she traces a gradual acceptance of a capitalist system and a shift towards the federation accepting a position as partner in negotiation for reforms with capital and dropping an overtly socialist opposition strategy in favour of compromise. COSATU, because of its junior role in neoliberal structures, has been left only to do its best to ameliorate the worst affects of neoliberal policy rather than engaging it at its root.²⁶

Concluding Remarks

While COSATU is unable to avert trends such as casualisation and flexibilisation it is doing its best to ameliorate their worst effects on its membership base. However, COSATU has not experienced the kind of influence that it had hoped for in terms of being able to advance the interests of its members. Instead it has become locked into a defensive strategy to protect their membership's interests – but within the neoliberal paradigm. It is increasingly incapable of channelling the ANC's policy choices and has thus lost the ability to direct social transformation from within the Alliance structures.

²⁵ Lehulere, Oupa "The Road to the Right: COSATU Economic Policy in the Post-Apartheid Period" in Bramble, T. and Barchiesi, F., (eds). *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*,(Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003) p.26

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of this trend with respect to the example of privatization see Van Driel, Maria "Unions and Privatisation in South Africa, 1990-2001" in Bramble, T. and Barchiesi, F., (eds). *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*,(Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003)

This is because the balance of forces in corporatist structures is weighed towards business and the ANC has pursued a neoliberal development programme whilst COSATU has become increasingly marginalised. This brings into serious question whether COSATU is able to exert the influence within corporatist structures necessary to steer the ANC's path towards the kind of social transformation that COSATU envisaged in the NDR. After all, it is in the very nature of neoliberalism to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a small elite and to remove economic determination from the working class. This is the very antithesis of a progression towards socialism. COSATU must question whether it can still hope to affect change from within the Alliance. The rest of this paper will focus on whether COSATU sees itself as having a broad political role or whether it is reverting to a traditional trade union role, focusing predominantly on shop floor issues. Whether or not COSATU seeks to link up with community struggles, it is argued, is a major indicator of this trend.

Chapter Three

Abahlali baseMjondolo

Introduction

This chapter will firstly take a brief look at the *imijondolos* (shack settlements) in Durban and explore the emergence of a social movement representing the shack dwellers. I will explain how this movement emerged out of the Kennedy Road settlement in response to the failure of local government to address the concerns of residents. I will examine the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement and explain how they have attempted to resist the slum clearance policies of the local government. It will be argued that their movement does not simply demand housing; they aim at radically democratising both their communities and their government that is elected to represent them. I will firstly examine the politics of the Abahlali movement and then explain how the dynamics of the movement contribute to its radical challenge to contemporary social movement theory that too often groups “new social movements” under the umbrella term of “single issue” politics. I will explain why this is not so in Abahlali’s case and why they could present an alternative to the strategy that COSATU and some social movements pursue of simply making material demands from the state. I will explore how their radical democratic culture sustains the movement and allows it to pursue an agenda that transcends a simple demand for housing.

Political Dispossession

Imijondolos make up a huge proportion of urban dwellings in Durban. According to government statistics, of the 3,026,974 people living in the municipal area, 920,000 people, or a half of the black population, live in the *imijondolos*.²⁷ The *imijondolos* are scattered across Durban (see map in appendix) and are constructed out of wood, card or plastic or any other suitable material at hand. Despite promises of housing for the residents of the *imijondolos* and that they are a temporary phenomena that will pass in due time, the settlements continue to grow. Kennedy Road, one of the informal settlements and the place where the Abahlali shackdwellers' movement, originated is located next to the municipal dump and the residents of these areas are forced to live in conditions of extreme poverty. Such are the deprived conditions in the shacks and the failure of government to build provide services and housing that the shackdwellers did not feel they could celebrate Freedom Day on April 27th with the rest of the nation. As the president of the Abahlali, Sbu Zikode, stated:

How can we celebrate freedom when we only here tales of freedom or see people's lives changed for the better in other parts of the country, but never in our communities. We cannot celebrate, we have nothing to be cheerful about. We are the forgotten people who are expected to be content with sharing five toilets among 5000 people. How can a community of 5000 people celebrate when it is expected to make do with six taps?²⁸

²⁷ Marx, Colin and Charlton, Sarah *University College London: Urban Slums Reports: The Case of Durban, South Africa* on http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dpu-projects/Global_Report/cities/durban.htm

²⁸ Majova, Zukile "5000 Join in 'Death of Freedom Protests'" in *The Mercury* 28th April, 2006

The residents of the Kennedy Road settlement are determined to stay where they are despite the city's plan to relocate the Kennedy Road settlement out to the peripheries of the city onto new houses on the green-field site of Verulum. This site is located outside the perimeter of the city. Whilst the residents of Kennedy Road want the housing they were promised back in 1993, they assert that they want this on the adjacent strip of land at Elf Road which had consistently been promised to them.²⁹ This is because the residents of the shack communities, although predominantly unemployed in the formal economy, perform various roles in the informal sector. These include informal trading, casual labour, recycling materials for money and many other such activities that demand that they remain in the city area so that they can easily access their sites of work. They are also wish to be close to local services like schools and hospitals that they fear will not be provided for them in Verulum.³⁰

Contrary to popular perceptions, including those of the unionists I interviewed, Abahlali's struggle does not simply come from impatience at the lack of housing or service delivery. Rather, it comes from the lack of respect and outright contempt with which they feel they have been treated by their local government. As Bryant has observed, it is not the slow delivery of the council which has angered the shack-dwellers, but the *way* in which they operate.³¹ Zikode criticises the manner in which local councillors treat the shack-settlements, complaining that "they take the vote and then you

²⁹ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (l) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Bryant, Jacob *Towards Delivery and Dignity: Community Struggle From Kennedy Road* (Unpublished dissertation) p.46

never see them again.”(Zikode) He told me that they never felt listened to, that the local ANC councillors would come into their communities during election time and then disappear back to their middle class suburbs. Zikode’s impression was that the ANC took these communities for granted.³²

The municipality insists that where possible, it will upgrade settlements *in situ*. City Manager Mike Sutcliffe states that this is the most desirable and cost-effective strategy to pursue: “By densifying new developments in strategically located areas along our High Priority Transport Network as well as in the former townships, the City plans to reduce the creation of new and unsustainable residential areas which are outside the urban edge and expensive to service.”³³ He also emphasised the commitment of the City to ensure that “basic infrastructure” was provided in the areas earmarked for resettlement including “semi-pressured water, waterborne sanitation and electricity to each site.”³⁴ However, there appears to be major discrepancies between the City management and the shack communities as to how this project is being implemented. The residents of Kennedy Road are concerned that they are being removed to ghettos at the edges of the city with no basic infrastructure or access to services such as schools and hospitals. Furthermore, as mentioned above, it is important to these communities that they stay in the city where they can remain close to their places of work.

Deputy City Manager Derek Naidoo came to Kennedy Road in November 2005 in order to try and prevent a protest march that had been arranged by Abahlali for the

³² Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

³³ Interview with Sutcliffe, Mike – Durban City Manager – E mail correspondence

³⁴ *ibid*

following day. The meeting was attended by the representatives of Abahlali as well as a large group of residents from the Kennedy Road settlement. At the meeting Naidoo responded to the requests of residents to be given the adjacent land on Elf Road that they had been consistently promised by telling them that the ground was not safe for building (despite a brick factory being built there) and that the fumes from the nearby dump made the air dangerous to the inhabitants (despite consistently reassuring middle class residents in the area of its safety).³⁵ After the residents at the meeting continued to question Naidoo, he then revealed to the people at the meeting that the entire settlement was to be relocated. As Pithouse observed:

From the last days of apartheid until this meeting people had consistently been promised housing in the area. People had been told that some housing would be provided in the outlying ghettos of Verulum or Mount Moriah, but they had never been told that they would all be moved to the rural periphery of the metro. Naidoo's emphatic announcement of impending mass forced removals from the city was deeply shocking.³⁶

Despite angry protests at the meeting, and a number of residents storming out of the community hall, Naidoo declared that the area had been “ring fenced” for clearance and that the policy would not be reversed.³⁷ It is important to note how the decision taken by the City authority was not discussed with the shack-dwellers and that it was presented to them (only after they interrogated Naidoo) as a *fait accompli*. At the end of the meeting, Naidoo described what had transpired as “participatory democracy”(Pit MR) The City Manager outlined to me the process of drafting housing policy and implementation:

³⁵Pithouse, Richard (2006) (l) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ ibid

Housing policy is to a large extent drafted at the National and Provincial level. Draft policy documents are circulated for public comment. When these are finalised, City officials communicate them to councillors and directly to communities during meetings. The implications of these policies are also workshopped with communities who have been selected for a housing project.³⁸

However, no such consultation process appears to have transpired at Kennedy Road, at least according to the Abahlali movement that has arisen precisely *because* of the way they have felt marginalised from determining their future. Zikode received a letter whilst I was conducting my interview with him. The letter was a response to an earlier correspondence sent by Zikode to the Ministry of Housing asking for a consultative meeting between the Ministry and Abahlali. After over three months the ministry sent its reply (see appendix). At the next meeting of Abahlali, Zikode angrily waved the letter to those present declaring that it contains “no commitment, no timeframe...it is just a letter to impress us.”³⁹ There is clearly a difference between how the City has framed participatory processes and what the shack dwellers at Kennedy Road claim to have experienced of such processes. The Ministry of Housing claims that the “success” of the slums clearance project “can be best summed up in the proven ability of various municipal service units, councillors and communities to work together and prove that integrated planning and development can be achieved within local authorities.”⁴⁰ However, in the light of the Housing Ministry’s apparent ambivalence to the concerns of the shack dwellers at Kennedy Road and the claim by Deputy City Manager Naidoo that his meeting on Kennedy Road was an example of “participatory democracy”(PITHOUSE MR) in action, there seems to be a wide disparity between the rhetoric and the practice of

³⁸ Interview with Sutcliffe, Mike – Durban City Manager – E mail correspondence

³⁹ Abahlali meeting Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06)

⁴⁰ Grimmet, Neville *Slums Clearance Project* on www.durban.gov.za

the City with respect to the levels of participation and democracy that the people of Kennedy Road have witnessed. Indeed, their experience of “participatory democracy” suggests that the City’s decision-making is anything but democratic and that participation involves communities like Kennedy Road passively accepting the City’s directives and moving quietly to the peripheral ghettos.

It is the perceived lack of consultation with the residents of the Kennedy Road settlement and the way they believe that their requests have been ignored which has added ferocity to the protests of Abahlali. As Patel argues: “Over the past few months, communities around the country have erupted in protest, and all with a similar fundamental claim – that they are tired, after a decade of democracy, of waiting for the government to treat them with respect. Respect has certainly been lacking in the way eThekweni Municipality has dealt with Durban’s poorest.”⁴¹ The manner in which they feel their elected representatives treat them makes them feel like that they have been disposed of their democracy and that determination of their lives is surrendered to technocratic governance: “*We believe that housing policy does not only require housing specialists, rich consultants and government. We believe that housing policy requires, most importantly, the people who need the houses.*”⁴² The common sentiment of Abahlali’s activities is that they have been consistently ignored and that only through action can they begin to be heard and to regain the respect they have been deprived by the dispossession of their democracy.⁴³

⁴¹ Patel, Raj (2005) Somewhere to live in dignity . *The Mercury*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁴² Original Emphasis Zikode, Sbu op. cit.,

⁴³ ibid

Taking to the Streets

Whilst Abahlali had consistently attempted to work within the structures of government, it was when they were consistently ignored and treated with contempt that they took to the streets. In the face of increasing marginalisation from the local government and the failure of local government to listen to the voices of the *imijondolos*, Abahlali held a meeting on 20th March, 2005 to decide what action to take. It was decided that on the following day they would block the Umgeni road near to the settlement. By blocking the road next to the settlement it was hoped that it would highlight the plight of the shack dwellers and also draw attentions to how the council had failed those in the shack settlements. Zikode says that “we have been encouraged by our municipality that the Zulu language cannot be understood by our officials, Xhosa cannot be understood, Sotho cannot be understood, even English cannot be understood. The only language they understand is us getting into the street. We have seen the result and have been encouraged.”⁴⁴ These protests emerge out of a sense of alienation from the local government; the Abahlali movement claims that the only way the local government deals with these shack communities is through lies and deceit. As Patel and Pithouse have said “...while portrayed as activist outbursts, on closer examination these marches and protests turn out to be rational, democratic engagements given the structures of power

⁴⁴ Quoted in Bryant op. cit., p.35

within which South Africa's poor live."⁴⁵ This is their way of making themselves heard when they believe they would otherwise be ignored.

The road blockaded evoked a hostile reaction from both the national and local government. The national government has reacted extremely defensively to Abahlali's uprising, brandishing protests as unwarranted criminal activity. Following the road blockade, President Mbeki stated that "We must stop this business of people going into the street to demonstrate about lack of delivery. These are the things the youth used to do in the struggle against apartheid."⁴⁶ This attitude at a national level has also been evident the local municipalities' response in Durban. When Abahlali vented its grievances through action, it was immediately criminalised and cast as an illegitimate means of "participating" in South African democracy, despite Abahlali claiming that they have been unable to participate in local government because they have been ignored by both their councillors and the municipality.

Contrary to Mbeki's belief that these protests arise out of impatience with a lack of service delivery and that they are merely orchestrated to demand services. Abahlali claims its continuous struggle is about reclaiming dignity. They feel that they should be listened to and that they should be allowed to exercise their right to protest. As Pithouse states:

⁴⁵ Patel, Raj and Pithouse, Richard (2005) The Third Nelson Mandela. *Voice of the Turtle*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁴⁶ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (I) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

They had accepted that delivery would be slow and that they must take responsibility for their own welfare. They were the model poor – straight out of the World Bank text books. They revolted not because they had believed and had done everything asked of them and they were still poor. They revolted because the moment they asked that their faith may not be spurned is the moment their aspirations for dignity became criminal.⁴⁷

The actions of the Abahlali have hitherto been met with repression from the municipality. City Manager Mike Sutcliffe banned the marches of Abahlali in what the Freedom of Expression Institute labelled “a flagrant violation of the Constitution and the Regulation of Gatherings Act” and it went on to condemn “the eThekweni Municipality’s blatant disregard for the rights of marginalised communities to exercise their freedom of expression.”⁴⁸ Activists on the marches have also been met with police brutality and intimidation as the municipality aimed at suppressing the protests.⁴⁹ This has included threats of violence toward journalists and academics if they document what has transpired.⁵⁰ What Abahlali declared as its attempts to regain the respect and democracy, the government dismissed as criminal. This began a new wave of protests. As Pithouse put it, “On the day of the road blockade they entered the tunnel of the discovery of the betrayal. Nothing has been the same since.”⁵¹ The road blockade was followed by marches organised by Abahlali. The first took place on 13th May, 2005 when 3000 Kennedy Road residents and people from the surrounding settlements, flat residents from

⁴⁷ ibid

⁴⁸ Quoted in Pithouse, Richard (2005) (I) Coffin for the Councilor. *Centre for Civil Society*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁴⁹ Patel Raj (2006) Shackdwellers resist KZN Premier. *Indymedia South Africa*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁵⁰ ibid

⁵¹ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (I) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers’ Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

Sydenham, residents of Wentworth township and a groups from the Socialist Student's Movement marched on councillor Baig to demand land, housing and his immediate resignation.⁵² They carried with them a mock coffin for the councillor to symbolise that to them he was dead to them, and that he no longer represented them. The march faced a large armed military presence and also a slur campaign attempting to cast the march as an IFP march.⁵³

Another example of the movement's activity was when as many as 8000 people from Kennedy Road and some newly-aligned partner settlements again marched to Baig, this time enacting a mock funeral for the councillor which symbolised to them that he was dead and no longer recognized as their councillor.⁵⁴ On 27th April, 2006 Abahlali mounted a symbolic UnFreedom Day event on the day that the rest of the country celebrated Freedom Day on the anniversary of the first democratic elections in 1994. The event brought groups from the various shack settlements together for what was considered a day of mourning for the loss of their freedom. The sentiment of the day was that the people of the shack settlements could not celebrate freedom with the rest of the country when they were still trapped in poverty. It was estimated that as many as 5000⁵⁵ crammed St Johns Church Hall to witness array of speakers and entertainment provided from across the different communities.

⁵² Pithouse, Richard (2005) (I) Coffin for the Councilor. *Centre for Civil Society*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁵³ *ibid*

⁵⁴ Bryant, Jacob op. cit., p.13

⁵⁵ Majova, Zukile "5000 Join in 'Death of Freedom Protests'" in *The Mercury* 28th April, 2006

Abahlali's actions fundamentally challenge the ANC government's belief that as leader of the liberation movement it is the only body bestowed with the responsibility to define who is (and who is not) a "legitimate" voice in civil society and how they can raise their grievances. Neocosmos argues that for a true democratic emancipatory project to emerge, "the state should not be allowed to dictate whether popular organisations are legitimate or not...only society itself should be entitled to bestow such legitimacy."⁵⁶ Although Abahlali has not turned its back on placing demands of the local government (its invite to Naidoo being one example) it has also used protest with a view to ensuring its voice is heard. It does not limit its demands to material concessions from the local government for housing or service delivery but defines for itself what can or cannot be granted by the government. In short, they want to subordinate government, in all its workings, to the people so that they can determine for themselves what can or cannot be demanded.

Subordinating the state to the people

There is an unfortunate tendency of the both those in government and those on the political left to compartmentalise all the activities of the "new social movements" under the umbrella of "single issue" politics that will fade once the issue has been addressed. This suggests that such struggles are parochial or, in Freund's words, "'popcorn' politics

⁵⁶ Neocosmos, Michael Development, Social Citizenship and Human Rights: Rethinking the Political Core of an Emancipatory Project in Africa Paper delivered at the Centre For Civil Society Seminar Series (2nd June, 2006) p.14

– immensely serious and volatile but unable to transcend the issues of the moment...⁵⁷ A common criticism of social movements in South Africa is that they emerge as a defensive, even reactionary force aiming to ameliorate or in some cases derail the worst excesses of the affects of neoliberalism on the poor. As Neocosmos argues, “...there is nothing inherent in social movements themselves which *necessarily* bears an emancipatory potential, let alone a project. In fact, when social movements are simply oppositional, simply *against* what exists, or clamour for state ‘delivery’ they can easily be demobilised and incorporated.”⁵⁸ This view is shared by Freund, who believes that such movements can be neutralised by the state if it acts with dexterity. Small reforms, he asserts, can help take the “fire” out of such processes.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, this analysis only holds true if the movement limits its scope to a material demand that the government can realistically fulfil. In the short term, the City Manager admits that this is unlikely with respect to housing:

Given our current allocation of funding from the Province, we would only meet our target of eradicating slums by 2015. In order to achieve the 2010 target, the City’s allocation of funding would need to be doubled and reserved exclusively for addressing slums. Apart from funding there are also other factors to consider such as capacity in the industry...consultation and participation...[and] the availability of sufficient materials such as cement... while it would be important for the City to meet such a target there are certain realities which need to be taken into account.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Freund, Bill “The State of South Africa’s Cities” in *State of the Nation 2005-2006* (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2005) p.322

⁵⁸ Neocosmos, Michael op. cit., p.32

⁵⁹ Freund, Bill op. cit., p.323

⁶⁰ Interview with Sutcliffe, Mike – Durban City Manager – E mail correspondence

More importantly, Abahlali's demands are not restricted to a single-issue material demand than can be met by the municipality if it simply acts with dexterity. Far from a parochial, simplistic demand for the state simply for more services, Abahlali demands something seemingly simple but with far reaching implications; they demand their voice to be heard and to be listened to. As Zikode put it to me:

What is interesting is that for the first time in the history of this country the poor of the poorest have come to have a voice....the very same people senior people who claim to be leading who sit in the union buildings and city hall will never put their feet here but they are always claiming to be leading us, they don't even know how we live but they claim to be our leaders....But now *the tide has turned*...you are hearing from the horses' mouth...we have come out to say *this is who we are, this is where we are and this is what they want*.(original emphasis)⁶¹

Who 'they' are is the shack-dwellers, challenging the stereotypes of a "surplus humanity"⁶² or a "dangerous underclass", swimming in a sea of their own squalor and vice who are judged too ignorant to know what to demand and are expected to simply defer to those that claim to lead them; those that claim to know more about what the shack-dwellers really need and what needs to be done in their name. What *they want*, as Pithouse succinctly sums up, "is nothing less than to subordinate the local manifestations of the state to society."⁶³ Or, as Zikode recently told a packed university auditorium,

Our movement seeks to bring the government to the ground, to bring the institutions of government and the private sector to the ground. We fight to bring policies that affect our people under the control of our people. Our masses, our unity and diversity is our strength, our pain, our voice. We have become the strong poor. The politics of a strong poor is an anti-party politics. *Our*

⁶¹ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

⁶² A term used by Davis, Mike *Planet of Slums* (New York, Verso, 2006)

⁶³ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (I) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

politics is not to put someone into an office. Our politics is to put our people above that office. And once we have finished with one office we move on to the next office.”(Original emphasis)⁶⁴

It is important to note that the struggle does not correspond to a reprisal of the anti-government struggle characterised during the struggle against the apartheid government. As such, it is not anti-ANC because, as Patel explains, many of the residents demanding the resignation of their councillor still chant “viva ANC”.⁶⁵ The ANC *as an organisation* still enjoys support in these areas and many of the Abahlali activists are members of the ANC. It is the local ANC councillors and ANC representatives in the Municipal government and the manner in which they are perceived to neglect the shack communities that are the subject of Abahlali’s protest, not the ANC *as a whole*. It is not simply Abahlali’s aim to claim the rights deemed by government that they deserve, it is their aim, through their actions, to determine these rights for themselves through their own commitment to democracy. Neocosmos argues that for movements to be emancipatory they “must be ‘for something’, and not simply against what exists.”⁶⁶ Abahlali demands nothing more than the radical democratisation of South African politics, and therefore their struggle will not simply end once small material concessions are granted by the government. In Bryant’s words, “So when will they stop struggling? Perhaps when South African democracy looks the way democracy looks at Kennedy road.”⁶⁷ Zikode believes that, in this way, the poor of South Africa can become the “third Nelson Mandela”, reclaiming and deepening their democracy. He states that “The first

⁶⁴ Zikode, Sbu *The Greatest Threat To Future Stability In Our Country Vs The Greatest Strength Of Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement* S.A. given at The Centre for Civil Society, Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Series, June 2006

⁶⁵ Patel, Raj (2005) Somewhere to live in dignity . *The Mercury*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁶⁶ Neocosmos, Michale op. cit., p.31

⁶⁷ Bryant, Jacob op. cit., p.54

Nelson Mandela was Jesus Christ. The second was Nelson Rolihlanhla Mandela. The third Nelson Mandela are the poor of the world.”⁶⁸ Abahlali’s demand that “the people shall govern” exists not simply in government rhetoric; they insist that it becomes the abiding principle of South African democracy. This is the essence of their struggle; the struggle for the poor to be heard and to be able to transform society from below.

It remains a moot point whether housing delivery will take the fire out of Abahlali’s struggle and lead to the cessation of its activities. However, as the group begins to discuss further expansion and the possibility of hosting a regional Social Movement Indaba, as well as its commitment to join and transform the national SMI, it appears that there is ambition on the part of the leadership to make Abahlali a greater political force, transcending the issue of housing delivery. However, as I shall now explain, this can only be achieved if Abahlali maintains its democratic culture that ensures communities have direct control over Abahlali’s direction. Without this, it is argued, Abahlali would lose its impetus as the support it depends on from the communities will be eroded.

Democracy in the Imijondolos

There is a vibrant democratic culture in the shack settlements, as Pithouse asserts: “Kennedy Road had, long before the road was blockaded, developed a profoundly

⁶⁸ Patel, Raj and Pithouse, Richard (2005) The Third Nelson Mandela. *Voice of the Turtle* <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

democratic culture and organisation.”⁶⁹ This democracy can be witnessed in the practices of the movement and the manner in which decision-making takes place. There is an extremely high emphasis on democracy within the shack-dwellers movement. They hold weekly open meetings to discuss issues raised by the residents and to discuss campaigns and action. Each settlement has its own development committee and these are directly elected from the settlements they represent and they attend the meetings of the Abahlali movement each week as well as holding their own individual meetings in their respective settlements.⁷⁰ The Abahlali meetings are usually attended by about thirty to forty elected representatives from the various development committees as well as residents from the local settlements, particularly if they have a grievance to raise.⁷¹ So far the level of involvement in these meetings appears to be fairly consistent and as the movement grows, more development committees from the surrounding areas will hopefully attend the meetings. When a major issue arises, such as the visit of deputy City Manager Naidoo, the attendance of the meeting will be supplemented by regular residents from the settlements. At the meetings each week a chair person is elected and the leaders of the various development committees report back. The meetings are open and fluid, allowing for anyone wishing to raise an issue or pass comment. Decisions are reached by attempting to find consensus and if this cannot be done then a vote might be taken. Any large decisions would have to first be referred back to the communities for future

⁶⁹ Pithouse, Richard (2005) (l) Coffin for the Councilor. *Centre for Civil Society*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

⁷⁰ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06) and see Bryant, Jacob op. cit., for more depth on this issue

⁷¹ Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06) and Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06)

discussion.⁷² The meetings are followed by the practice of reporting back to the residents what has transpired at the meetings and to consult over future strategy. The decision to take actions such as marches is decided through debate at the meetings and although there are often some elements that press more strongly for action, each issue is debated thoroughly. Bryant, who witnessed many of these meetings, believes that there is a genuine consensus and that the community reaches these decisions together.⁷³ The UnFreedom Day event allowed me to talk to some of the residents who had attended the event. Many of them expressed their support for the movement and confidence in the leadership's ability to represent them.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the sheer scale of the number who attended the event and the marches suggests that the community firmly supports the activities being organised by the Abahlali movement.

In the short time that it has been around Abahlali has grown fairly rapidly as a movement. This has involved absorbing surrounding settlements into the movement. However, the expansion of the movement is not achieved at the expense of the democratic culture of the organisation. Each new settlement that joins and comes to Abahlali's meetings must first hold elections for its representatives and endorse the democratic practices of those already in the movement. I was witness to this process at one of the meetings where the newly elected representatives of another settlement were greeted with applause and congratulated for their respective elections.⁷⁵ There is a will to expand the movement further but this is tempered by a rigid adherence to the groups

⁷² Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06) and Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06)

⁷³ Bryant, Jacob op. cit., p.331

⁷⁴ Informal communications with people at the Abahlali UnFreedom Day event (28/04/06)

⁷⁵ Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06)

democratic principles. The leadership is fully aware that the tremendous support that the group enjoys from the communities is largely due to the leadership of the movement being firmly rooted within their respective communities and they are thus held firmly accountable by those that they represent.⁷⁶ Desai argues that for social movements representing the poor, “of absolutely crucial importance is that no insistence that resistance should assume a character significantly different from the expectations that inform it.”⁷⁷ The actions that Abahlali takes are informed by the very people that they are intended for, and as such it can act with the assurance that the community will not only support the actions, but thousands of them will also participate. As Pithouse remarks, “It was, I think, this highly democratic nature of organization in Kennedy Road that produced its radicalism.”⁷⁸

There is caution on the part of the movement’s leadership when trying to expand the movement’s activities and there is careful debate and consideration of the value of such ventures. An example of this was the idea of holding the regional Social Movements Indaba in Durban. At meetings discussing such a move, there was careful deliberation and it was emphasised that taking such a decision to move forward in this way would have to be done carefully, so as not to pursue a course not informed by the communities themselves. It was understood that agreement over these issues might take time, but that frustrations would need to be curbed in order to allow time for proper deliberation and

⁷⁶ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

⁷⁷ Desai, Ashwin *We Are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Cape Town, Monthly Review Press, 2002) p.143

⁷⁸ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (I) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers’ Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

consultation with the communities.(Meeting) There is an extremely suspicious approach towards large bodies such as the national SMI in Johannesburg. Having attended the national SMI, Zikode told me that the delegates from Abahlali were extremely concerned about the structure of the organisation and that

“there is a need for these groups to unite so the SMI is a good platform for that. But what we have not so far found in the SMI, is the SMI was not democratic. So as Abahlali we have laid a foundation of democracy in Abahlali but in the SMI...they don't understand the culture of democracy.”⁷⁹

They were concerned that their comrades in the SMI would select who attended the conference and that these people were not necessarily elected by those they purportedly represent. Mthembu, at the University of KwaZulu Natal, has argued that many of the new social movements are characterised by elite, rich activists who can afford to attend national and international conferences whilst alienating the grassroots communities. Where these movements take us will depend on the ability of the communities “to fully lead and control their own struggles.”⁸⁰ If movements are to pursue a truly emancipatory agenda *for* the poor then they must take their direction *from* the poor.

Abahlali is not dependent on external funding in order to carry out its operations. Many of the marches simple require a “whip round” for the materials to make banners but, as Patel and Pithouse remarked, they “could have gone ahead without any of these baubles.”⁸¹ Although Abahlali has received a small amount of funding from external sources, this has only helped to *facilitate* Abahlali's activities. For instance, logistical

⁷⁹ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

⁸⁰ Mthembu, Ntokozo “Poor Must Lead Their Own Struggles” in *The Mercury* (July 18th, 2006)

⁸¹ Patel, Raj and Pithouse, Richard (2005) *The Third Nelson Mandela. Voice of the Turtle*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

support for meetings is provided by people linked to the University, providing transport or technical expertise such as enabling the marches and various gatherings to be documented through photographs and film.⁸² However, whilst Abahlali might benefit from such contributions, it is not dependent on any funders who influence the nature of the struggle; such a situation would be the antithesis of Abihlai's commitment to internal democracy. As such, Abahlali is able to pursue an autonomous people-driven, rather than elite-driven struggle that is independent and takes its direction from the communities rather than external funders. This allows Abahlali to remain rooted in the interests of those in the shack settlements that they claim to represent and relieves any pressure to represent external interests such as those of political parties, trade unions or other social movements. By remaining rooted within the community and enjoying the support of its constituents, Abahlali is able to confidently assert both its legitimacy, and its independence. As such, Abahlali can ward-off any organisation that seeks to absorb or direct it in any particular way. Zikode claimed that:

Right now Abihali we are facing a big challenge, various organisations and social movements want to absorb Abahlali and on the outside you know, the big fish wants to swallow the small fish. But Abahlali are still new but they are huge right now. ...its quite interesting because sometimes we are aware that these organisations have got money but they don't have constituents, you know, *people*, ... Abahlali's is the poor struggle - struggle of the poor – therefore money will not tempt us....we cannot therefore be bought.”⁸³

Whilst well-funded groups such as the SMI might have vast resources, *Abihali* can resist them because it has the most important resource, that that gives it most strength, the support of its constituents.

⁸² for example the UnFreedom Day event was filmed. Abahlali UnFreedom Day event (28/04/06)

⁸³ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

Concluding Remarks

Abahlali seek to transform state-civil society relations in such a way that South Africa adopts a truly radical democratic structure. This starts in the *imijondolos* by making Abahlali a thoroughly democratic organisation through rigorous meetings and consultations with the communities they claim to represent. It is hoped that this bottom-up democracy can be spread to the local government level and, in the future, become the very foundation of South African democracy.

This offers a radical challenge to corporatist systems of government that attempt to define legitimate and illegitimate groups in civil society in addition to the processes and tactics that such groups can use and what they can reasonably demand from their government, whether locally or nationally. Through their activities Abahlali has attempted to define these for itself, advocating the idea that only the poor can determine what is done in their name. This poses serious questions for COSATU which is itself embroiled in the corporatist structures of the Alliance. The primacy of business interests within neoliberal corporatism has given COSATU a junior role in decision-making and forced it to accept the parameters of the neoliberal paradigm and the diktats of discipline and responsibility within which to channel both its demands and its actions. As we shall

see in the following chapter, such a logic is extremely pervasive at local levels and prevents COSATU from engaging with radical alternative strategies that could serve to reverse its defensive strategy into an offensive one for emancipatory societal transformation.

Chapter 4

Towards a united struggle?

Introduction

This chapter will firstly explore whether unionists in Durban felt that the priorities of COSATU were different than they had been in the past. After its formation during the nineteen eighties, COSATU emerged as a major political force, pursuing broad political objectives that extended beyond the workplace; the traditional site of trade union struggles.⁸⁴ COSATU aimed at not simply overthrowing the apartheid government, it sought to forge a new society, in allegiance with the ANC, based on an economic transformation brought about by working class control of the economy. During the struggle COSATU was active in community campaigns which it saw as indistinguishable from the interests of its members as both workers and members of the community.

My study sought to establish whether in Durban such an orientation towards broad political objectives could still be witnessed. During my contact with unionists I asked questions to ascertain whether they thought COSATU's commitment to community struggles had diminished and whether or not COSATU was now primarily focused on worker issues. I wanted to establish what their opinions were about mobilising those outside their membership base such as the unemployed, and whether they thought COSATU strategy should encompass these groups and the practical steps the unions were

⁸⁴ Von Holdt, Karl "The Political Significance of COSATU: A Response to Plaut" in *Transformation* 5 (1987)

taking to mobilise groups like the unemployed. I found that there was less of a commitment towards campaigns that did not directly involve the interests of union members and that commitment to campaigns on the issue of unemployment was largely limited to rhetoric or symbolic demonstrations and there seemed no long-term strategy of how to mobilise this group.

I will demonstrate how this contrasted with Abahlali's conception of links with unions which dismissed the dichotomy between employed and unemployed workers claiming that unions were an important actor in advancing working class interests *as a whole* and that this was one part of a broader struggle to challenge the system of governance in South Africa. I will then analyse the trade union responses to the Abahlali movement. I will present some of the suspicious, reactionary responses that Abahlali have provoked and explain what implications I believe this has for COSATU's strategy in the future. I will also look into the misconceptions of Abahlali's goals and the tendency to dismiss them as single-issue, material demands placed on the local government. This, I will argue, reflects the blinkered strategy that COSATU has adopted as it has become mired in the logic of South Africa corporatism; rendering it unable to conceive of alternative strategies other than to win more influence *within* neoliberal corporatist arrangements.

Changing Priorities For COSATU?

When I asked trade unionists whether they thought community campaigns were still important it was commonly stated that they were and that community struggles were important because they affected workers when they were outside the workplace. They also identified it as integral to their own campaigns as a union. One example was Sdumo Dlamini, KZN Provincial Chairperson of COSATU, who told me that community campaigns were “very much important....the challenges that we are all faced with are in common: workers are exposed to all these challenges where they are still in society before they get to work they are affected by this, when they are at work whatever they are doing affects society.”⁸⁵ It is important to note here that although my interviewees expressed sympathy for community campaigns, their language was often worker-orientated and their immediate concern was for the wellbeing of their members within those communities rather than the community as a whole.⁸⁶

Indeed, I wanted to clarify whether or not my respondents felt that the priorities of COSATU had now firmly shifted from a mass advocacy of both worker and community rights towards a labour-centric orientation focusing on the interests of its members.

⁸⁵ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

⁸⁶ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06), Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06), Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

Firstly I wanted to establish why they felt political unionism and engagement with community campaigns had been important during the anti-apartheid struggle. During the nineteen eighties the union debates that were being waged focused on whether the unions should maintain a shop-floor, workerist orientation or whether they should engage in the broader political struggles.⁸⁷ COSATU was formed as a gradual consensus was reached amongst some of the unions that workplace and community struggles were inseparable in the face of the apartheid government and that COSATU had to fight as part of the broader political struggle. When I asked them about COSATU's previous role as a political union they told me that this had been essential because, as one official said, "back then we all had an enemy"⁸⁸ I was repeatedly told that it was an integral part of COSATU's political project back in the nineteen eighties to ensure that it affiliated with groups like the United Democratic Front (UDF) in order to empower the broader movement and that this brought it closer to the communities.⁸⁹

However, the unionists I had contact with repeatedly told me that the emphasis had now changed and that shop floor issues were prioritised ahead of community issues. One shop steward told me that he felt that unlike in the nineteen eighties, COSATU was no longer "rooted" in the communities and that back in then "it was easy to get a common understanding [with community struggles] but now you find COSATU moving slowly to the working places."⁹⁰

⁸⁷ See Plaut, M "The Political Significance of COSATU" in *Transformation* 2 (1986) and Von Holdt, Karl "The Political Significance of COSATU: A Response to Plaut" in *Transformation* 5 (1987)

⁸⁸ Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

⁸⁹ Informal discussions at COSATU, SACP, ANC May Day Rally at Curreys Fountain, Durban (01/05/06)

⁹⁰ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

An interesting point that emerged on several occasions was that dealing with community struggles and the unemployed was not necessarily part of COSATU's remit. One member of the National Union of Mineworkers at the May Day rally told me that "it is up to the ANC to be doing these things".(May Day) There was an acceptance of a de-facto division of labour in the Alliance structures; that community issues were to be left within the ambit of SANCO or local councillors. This division of labour was summed up by one of the union educators stating that

There is a big conflict between councillors and trade unionists. Councillors are elected supposedly directly from communities and are therefore in charge. Trade unionists are elected from the shop floor and therefore they are in charge there. So [the councillor says] 'how dare you cross the line and you move over to where you are supposedly not in charge'.⁹¹

This might seem sensible; COSATU *is* elected by workers and despite the fact that some of its members will no doubt live in the communities, it is not directly accountable to the other residents. COSATU is, after all, a trade union and perhaps we should not be surprised if it reverts to a predominantly workerist focus, particularly when COSATU's formation as a political union in the eighties was a result of the demand to challenge the apartheid government directly, which included a broader political role and greater involvement in community campaigns as part of the broader struggle. As was discussed in chapter two, the end of apartheid resulted in a reconfiguration of state – civil society relations as the ANC called upon those organisations that had fought in the struggle to "join hands" for the country's development project and the consolidation of

⁹¹ Interview with Anonymous – Union Educator – (18/05/06)

democracy. There was a shift in the orientation of COSATU from a militant organisation opposing the apartheid state towards a developmentalist union cooperating with the state's national development strategy. The launch of COSATU as a *political* union was based on the existence of an apartheid state that merged the interests of both workers and communities and formed the need for shared struggle.⁹² Once its apartheid foe was vanquished and COSATU's ally in the struggle, the ANC, was now occupying government offices COSATU's outlook was radically altered as it accepted a role in corporatist structures in order to pursue concessions for its members in political spaces that had not previously be opened. It also sought to assist its ally, the ANC, to consolidate its position and pursue its development project. It was assumed that through cooperation with the ANC that COSATU would yield the major influence in government policy-making and that its aspirations for social transformation could now be pursued through the new democratic institutions.

However, as discussed in chapter three, the shift towards neoliberal policies by the ANC government resulted in a change in the balance of forces within corporatists structures. This change bolstered the capacity of business to influence policy whilst eroding COSATU's ability to exert the influence it had hoped to wield in order to channel ANC policy into a more redistributionalist framework that would give the working class greater control of the economy. This has led many commentators to question whether it is now important for COSATU to re-engage with community struggles, such as that of Abahlali in order to rekindle its political strength and perhaps

⁹² Von Holt op. cit.,

join an offensive strategy to challenge the ANC's neoliberal shift.⁹³ Desai has likened COSATU to a once-proud boxing champion who has grown sluggish and ring rusty that needs to re-engage with emerging social movements from the communities in order to command the level of respect it had done in the nineteen eighties.⁹⁴ A key factor in such a strategy would be for COSATU to advance the interests of a broader working class outside of its membership base, including the unemployed.

Attitudes Towards the Unemployed

A basic tenet of a commitment to a wider struggle in the form of political unionism is to advance a broader working class interest outside of the union's membership base. This would include mobilising groups such as the unemployed and embarking on strategies that will service the interests of this groups as well as its immediate members. I wanted to find out whether such a commitment existed or whether the unions has a member-centric, workerist focus. Those I interviewed made a telling distinction between the interests of those who were employed and those who were unemployed. When I asked whether or not a SAMWU official believed that his members

⁹³ Desai, Ashwin (2005) Shadow Boxing? Cosatu, Social Movements and the ANC government. *Centre for Civil Society* <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28> and also see Webster, Eddie and Buhlungu, Sakhele "Between Marginalisation and Revitalisation? The State of Trade Unionism in South Africa" in *Review of African Political Economy* Number 100 (2004) for a detailed outlook on COSATU strategy

⁹⁴ Desai, Ashwin (2005) Shadow Boxing? Cosatu, Social Movements and the ANC government. *Centre for Civil Society* <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

felt they shared the same interests as those in the *imijondolos* and should engage in a broader struggle with them he stated that:

My members are entitled to housing, we negotiated housing for them so they can't complain about housing. They are entitled to 120,000 Rand housing subsidies they cannot go with those people [Abahlali] and demand housing. In most instances where people are employed, most of them have housing subsidies....so if you go on the march of Abahlali and interviewed those people you would find that the majority are unemployed – they want free housing....some of our interests can be reconciled, some of them cannot. *There will always be a conflict of interest.*" (Emphasis added⁹⁵)

There was an acknowledgement that the union members held a privileged position and that COSATU would have to deal with their immediate concerns first.⁹⁶ One shop steward commented that what was needed was “two different strategies”, one for the employed and one for the unemployed.⁹⁷ Although there was a genuine will to show solidarity with the unemployed, this was relatively symbolic and there seemed to be little variety in ideas as to what strategy COSATU should use to try and mobilise this section of the working class. When I asked about their strategy they cited the general strike and march that was to be held in Durban.⁹⁸ This referred to a one day general strike held on the 18th June, 2006 and a mass march through the centre of Durban to demand that the government do more to tackle poverty and unemployment. This appeared to be a clear-cut demonstration of COSATU's desire to represent the interests of a broader working

⁹⁵ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06)

⁹⁶ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06) Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06) Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06) Interview with Pakkies, Mthimobe – SAMWU Regional Deputy Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

⁹⁷ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

⁹⁸ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06) Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06) Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06) Interview with Pakkies, Mthimobe – SAMWU Regional Deputy Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

class beyond its membership base. On the surface it also presented a clear example of COSATU's will to challenge the government over its political direction.

The reaction from the right wing press was predictable: *The Financial Mail* was extremely critical of the strike action, quoting one former unionist (now an economic advisor to the government), Iraj Abedian, as saying "how can you call a national strike on the basis of something as broad as an end to unemployment and poverty?" He went on to argue that COSATU should focus on achievable demands of the state and that "for a national strike you need a realistic hook."⁹⁹ The article went on to condemn COSATU's strike action, claiming that COSATU leaders do not appreciate the damage that these strikes can do to the economy and that tackling the problems of unemployment and poverty were the remit of the government: "having achieved for its members just about the best labour rights and protection in the world, COSATU now seems to be casting about for a cause to maintain its influence...it is misguided if it believes it can rekindle the kind of role labour played under apartheid as gladiators for a political cause."¹⁰⁰

It is important however, that one looks beyond the rhetoric of the strike action. The strike is scant evidence that COSATU is once again trying to become a "gladiator for a political cause." This was a limited action and it was doubtful whether there were indeed, any unemployed on the march through town that was being organised in their name. One of the union educators explained that COSATU would arrange transport for its members to come out on the march but that he thought it extremely unlikely that they

⁹⁹ "Searching For A Role?" *Financial Mail* May 26th 2006

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

would arrange transport for the unemployed from communities such as Kennedy Road.¹⁰¹ Whilst the strike action grabbed the attention of the right wing media, it also allowed COSATU to reaffirm its claim to be the representative of a broader working class. However, it appeared that interaction with the unemployed would remain largely symbolic; a single-day event and when I pressed them there appeared to be no apparent strategy for long-term mobilisation of this group.¹⁰²

This position differed markedly from that of Abahlali's President who saw no differentiation between those who were employed and those who were not and envisioned a sustained struggle for *all* sections of the working class. It is clear that Zikode saw a relationship with the unions as a natural result of being part of the same struggle: "When you talk about the workers the reality is that we are all working class actually; both unemployed and employed, we are all working class. So workers are found within the communities."¹⁰³ Zikode articulates Abahlali's struggle the following way: "It is warned that this is not about making small changes to policies. This is class struggle. This is a struggle between the Haves and Don't Haves. Our society can only be saved if the Don't Haves win this struggle."¹⁰⁴ He saw it as important that employed workers within the *imijondolos* and those recently retrenched or in insecure forms of employment were involved with the unions. "It is important we engage more," he said, for the unions knew "table language," and their knowledge of dealing with employers, earned through

¹⁰¹ Interview with Anonymous – Union Educator – (18/05/06)

¹⁰² Interview with Zondi, Nhlanhla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06) Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06) Interview with Pakkies, Mthimobe – SAMWU Regional Deputy Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

¹⁰³ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

¹⁰⁴ Zikode, Sbu *The Greatest Threat To Future Stability In Our Country Vs The Greatest Strength Of Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement* S.A. given at The Centre for Civil Society, Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Series, June 2006

years of experience, was a positive prospect for the working people of the *imijondolos*.¹⁰⁵ He believed that cooperation could happen in the future, but that COSATU leadership who were detached from their membership, were the real object to cooperation. “It is just that these high profile people are too close to the ANC and its hard for them to oppose the law...but the reality is that the workers are at our level, we are the workers, we interact with workers.”¹⁰⁶ It was interesting that Zikode envisaged a broad movement of the working class that steadfastly rejected the dichotomy between employed and unemployed; as he put it, “we are all working class”.¹⁰⁷

It is also important to note that this broad struggle included the unions and their ability to advance workplace struggles through their “table talk” but that this should not be the end goal of an emancipatory movement. As discussed above, Abahlali saw any material concessions it could gain should as just part of a broader project to subordinate all the realms of politics; local and national government, the workplace, the communities, to the direction of the poor.¹⁰⁸

Why has COSATU found it difficult to mobilise the unemployed?

As we shall see with a review of trade union responses to the Abahlali movement, the trade unions failed to share such a broad political project. We must consider why this

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Zikode, Sbu - President of Abahlali baseMjondolo (05/05/06)

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*

¹⁰⁸ Zikode, Sbu *The Greatest Threat To Future Stability In Our Country Vs The Greatest Strength Of Abahlali baseMjondolo Movement* S.A. given at The Centre for Civil Society, Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture Series, June 2006

might be: Why *is* COSATU decreasingly able to mobilise the unemployed and does this perhaps represent the lack of a genuine commitment to a broader political project as they prioritise protecting their membership's interests?

Neoliberal corporatism has put COSATU on the back-foot as the balance of forces has tilted in favour of business and this has forced COSATU to adopt a defensive, damage-limitation strategy of making small reforms within the neoliberal paradigm.¹⁰⁹ COSATU's inability to challenge the core foundations of neoliberalism such as flexibilisation and casualisation leave it only able to try and ameliorate their least desirable effects and to attempt to shield its member's rights and privileges in the face of this neoliberal onslaught.

Neoliberal policies such as casualisation and flexibilisation have led to a profound weakening of COSATU. As more and more people are working in "non-standard" employment (such as temps, casual labour, and part timers) COSATU is finding it harder to mobilise this group. Barchiesi argues that because of the growth of these forms of employment, COSATU has to adapt quickly to meet the needs of a changing working class but that so far COSATU has, by its own admission, been slow to address this problem.¹¹⁰ As Naidoo has explained:

COSATU's principle of 'one industry, one union, one federation' seems ill-suited to the needs of a changing working class, in the face of steady growth in the number of casual, seasonal, and flexible workers without a single or permanent worksite. While it recognises openly that it is

¹⁰⁹ See Van Driel, Maria "Unions and Privatisation in South Africa, 1990-2001" in Bramble, T. and Barchiesi, F., (eds). *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*, (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003)

¹¹⁰ Barchiesi, Franco op. cit., p.4

failing to organise these new workers, it still sticks solidly to its position of focusing on the formal sector and building the industrial form of a trade union.¹¹¹

COSATU is finding it difficult to represent a changing working class as more and more labourers are employed as casuals or in the informal sector. As it stands, COSATU is representing an ever-decreasing pool of full-time, contracted workers and is failing to instigate strategies for recruiting those outside of this group.¹¹² Neoliberal policies of flexibilisation and casualisation of the workforce have thus had a detrimental impact on COSATU's ability to represent and mobilise workers across different industrial sectors and have sapped much of its strength, challenging its position as guardian of a broader working class.¹¹³

It is important to investigate whether or not COSATU has a thorough commitment to mobilising and protecting the interests of the unemployed as part of a broader political struggle. As I explained above, in Durban such a commitment was extremely modest and although there was a certain level of symbolic activity there was no long-term action or strategy to engage more with the unemployed. There was a tendency to define their interests as being disparate and it is important to explore some of the reasons for such attitudes.

The structural power of capital relative to labour is made particularly acute in South Africa where this structural power is bolstered by extremely high levels of

¹¹¹ Naidoo, Prishani "The New UDF" *Centre for Civil Society* Accessed on <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28,11,2199> May 11th 2006

¹¹² Buhlungu, Sakhele and Webster, Eddie "Work Restructuring and the Future of Labour in South Africa" in *State of The Nation 2006* (Capetown, HSRC Press, 2006)

¹¹³ Desai, Ashwin (2005) Shadow Boxing? Cosatu, Social Movements and the ANC government. *Centre for Civil Society* <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

unemployment. Labour unions are severely restricted in pursuing strike action as their members face the constant threat of “scabs” from the large (and growing) pool of unemployed workers taking their jobs if they participate in prolonged industrial action that could ironically be held in their name. The government is also quick to reaffirm the discourse that strike action could damage the economy as a whole and threaten investor confidence, thus endangering further job creation.¹¹⁴

Rampant unemployment and poverty erode solidarities between employed and unemployed and create fragmented identities amongst sections of the working class. Such sentiments are captured by Bramble’s study in which he detects an increasingly self centred attitude amongst union members in which one of his interviewees stated: “Before the LRA, workers would strike even over an individual worker. Now that is no more there...Today, the slogan is ‘An injury to one...it’s that man’s baby.’”¹¹⁵ Seekings has suggested that COSATU has increasingly pursued policies such as the Basic Income Grant and increases in education expenditure that whilst, on the surface, appear to be pro-poor, in fact represent the interests of union members rather than simply the poor themselves.¹¹⁶ He argues that the aim of COSATU’s strategy has increasingly come to protect its members interests, protecting their jobs and increasing their wages whilst

¹¹⁴ Desai Aswin & Habib Adam (2004) Labour Relations in Transition: the Rise of Corporatism in South Africa's Automobile Industry. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*

¹¹⁵ Bramble, Tom (2003) “*Social Movement Unionism since the Fall of Apartheid: the Case of NUMSA on the East Rand*” in Bramble, T. and Barchiesi, F., (eds). *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*, (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003) p.91

¹¹⁶ Seekings, Jeremy “Trade Unions, Social Policy and Class Compromise in Post-Apartheid South Africa” in *ROAPE* (2004) Volume 31, Number 100

maintaining its pro-poor discourse in order to maintain its image as a champion for the poor and a broader working class.¹¹⁷

It is beyond the scope of this paper to speculate whether or not such instances are indicative of a wider trend towards an inward-facing, self interested COSATU, yet there were clear instances in my contact with COSATU members that the close ties and solidarity formed between COSATU unions and the unemployed were not as strong as before. As discussed above, many of the unionists felt that COSATU was becoming increasingly workerist in its orientation and strategy and actions towards mobilising and defending the interests of the unemployed were largely symbolic. One reason for the emphasis on a membership focus was suggested by a SAMWU shop steward who suggested that “it is true that COSATU do more to those that are working because its where their power lies...”¹¹⁸ Samantha Khan, an educator from the worker’s college summarised this trend as follows:

the unions can get nothing out of people who are not working so its all about resources, its all about what they can get out of people. And then they hide behind this mirage of ‘we are representing all the workers and unemployed’ but the reality is that they only represent people’s needs who give them something in return.¹¹⁹

The strategy of COSATU has been increasingly geared towards protecting its members. Because, as discussed in chapter three, COSATU has been unable to halt the ANC’s adoption of neoliberal policies it has adopted a defensive strategy of trying to ameliorate the worst effects of these policies on its members. As neoliberal policies such as the

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

¹¹⁸ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

¹¹⁹ Interview with Khan, Samantha – Union Educator – (18/05/06)

casualisation and flexibilisation of the workforce have been enacted, COSATU has found it increasingly difficult to represent a changing working class. Its inability to mobilise the unemployed is compounded by pressure on the leadership to protect its members' jobs in the face of a huge pool of unemployed workers.

Attitudes Towards Abahlali

What is particularly interesting in my interviews and discussions with the trade unionists in Durban was the suspicion which they displayed towards Abahlali's activities. These suspicions were by no means homogenous however, and many different opinions as to the funding and motives were voiced. Firstly I will discuss some of these suspicions and then explain why, in Abahlali's case, these are unfounded. I will then explain why this profound misunderstanding highlights COSATU's problem with conceptualizing alternative movements outside of state structures and how its reactionary, defensive attitude towards any movement that engages with the government (both locally and nationally) in a critical manner prevents it from not only forging links with these groups, but also from developing a common understanding and emancipatory project with them.

The major concern that the unionists raised was over the funding of Abahlali. Doubts over where the group was able to access resources from caused a wide range of suspicions and misconceptions as to who were the group's funders and how these groups were using Abahlali for other political purposes. There was a genuine concern on the part of unionists I spoke with that external funders were taking the issue of housing and

channeling it into their own political agendas. As the Regional Chairperson of COSATU told me “there is a danger of our organs of civil society being manipulated or dictated to from outside...they tend to be dictated to by funders on *what* issues to raise and *how* they must raise these issues.”(Original emphasis)¹²⁰ He believed that being unsure about Abahlali’s sources of funding was a major impediment to supporting and possibly cooperating with the movement: “We would welcome a discussion with those groupings where they feel that we can engage. Our doors are always open. But the determining factor or weakness [is] around your [Abahlali’s] funders.”¹²¹

This idea that Abahlali’s issues over housing were being manipulated from outside gave rise to a host of direct suspicions and allegations. One of these was that that it was rival political parties or other anti-ANC forces raising these issues for their own benefit at elections. As one shop steward said, the housing issue was “understandable” but that:

the problem here is that it has been politicised, and when it is politicised it is politicised in such a way that it is used [to] fight against the government...you find that it is led by the counterparts who use it to dent the name of the African National Congress...It is now *no longer* the issue [housing] but it is a fight against the ANC.¹²²

Another organiser said there are:

Sometimes political under linings that you [Abahlali] are not mentioning in public...they used to have a genuine complaint...now this has changed and they have become an independent candidate

¹²⁰ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

¹²¹ *ibid*

¹²² Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

for ward councilor....We have to defend *our own* organization [the ANC]. That is where we have got some kind of problem [with cooperating].¹²³

Several of the unionists I had discussions with on Mayday also made the claim that it was NADECO, an IFP splinter group, who had been responsible for mobilising this group at election times. This suspicion was also shared by the Regional Chairperson. He told me Abahlali had “said we don’t want ANC, we don’t want the SACP, we don’t want the IFP we want ourselves.’ Yet before the elections the NEDECO, the political party, came and launched a branch there.”¹²⁴ It was assumed that groups organised outside the Alliance structures *must* be mobilising against the ANC. One unionist even went as far to allege that it might be the old regime behind Abahlali. This was only voiced by one unionist but I found it telling of just how varied (and distorted) the perceptions of Abahlali were. It was indicative of the general unease that COSATU has with regard to groups operating outside Alliance structures. He stated that:

Maybe the money for these social movements is coming from the old regime....Personally I believe we need to be more sure of what we are in for. I cannot support something that I am not sure where the funds are coming from. Because, we really lost quite a number of people during the old regime.¹²⁵

Another suspicion that was raised by several unionists was that the movement was influenced by intellectuals pursuing their own agenda.¹²⁶ Often these intellectuals, it was

¹²³ Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

¹²⁴ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

¹²⁵ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06)

¹²⁶ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06) Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06) Interview with Pakkies, Mthimobe – SAMWU Regional Deputy Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

asserted, were “ultra leftists” intent on bringing down the ANC. In particular one named Ashwin Desai as the key agitator, using the group for his own purposes.¹²⁷ It has also been leveled in the past that Patrick Bond had been involved in organising the group.¹²⁸ There were several unionists who raised concern and intrigue as to why academics from the university were involved with the group. There was the concern that these academics were trying to further their own goals by manipulating this group: “we know it was professors who went to speak to those people. They guide two issues, housing and going for elections.”¹²⁹

At this point it is important to challenge some of these suspicions. Abahlali has, as discussed in chapter four, been able to remain relatively autonomous in terms of funding and where it has received support this has *never* been conditional upon Abahlali raising an issue or directing its campaign in some way or another. What little funding that Abahlali has received has been from church groups and small contributions from the Centre for Civil Society (CCS) at the University of KwaZulu Natal. As mentioned earlier, however, these groups fund Abihalli to *facilitate* its activities rather than to *direct* them. For example, CCS gave money to cover the cost of printing booklets for the UnFreedom Day event which contained various letters and thought pieces from the residents of the shack settlements. It also helped towards transport costs and the printing of t-shirts and

¹²⁷ *ibid*

¹²⁸ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (I) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers’ Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

¹²⁹ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

pamphlets for the UnFreedom Day event.¹³⁰ Although this evidence relies on the word of the group and of those closely involved with them, from attending meetings it was clear to see that where funders did offer support, this came with no conditions.¹³¹ It was also clear that there was a distinct lack of funding for some of the proposed activities such as hosting the regional indaba.¹³² A strategy to enable the group to raise finances and keep costs down to a minimum for these events was discussed at length at the meetings I attended and there was a special workshop arranged to discuss the viability of the regional indaba.¹³³ The group asserts that it has not been under the influence of any political party and, in reality, Abahlali has a principled objection to supporting *any* political party - even independent candidates. It is clear from their campaigns that they have not been engaged in party-political activity and have only launched “no land, no house, no vote” campaigns at elections rather than show support for any particular candidate.¹³⁴ The group is not anti-ANC. On the contrary, many of its members are, or have been, ANC members. Although academics have been involved this has been purely in a facilitating role, getting the group media coverage or helping with logistical matters at meetings or marches. Although some academics have offered logistical support to the group, as mentioned before, academics have not attempted to control the agenda of Abahlali or tried to direct its struggle in any particular way. It was clear from the meetings that I attended and from those attended by researchers since the road blockade

¹³⁰ Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06) and Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06)

¹³¹ Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06)

¹³² Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06)

¹³³ Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06) and Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06)

¹³⁴ Pithouse, Richard (2006) (I) Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa *Monthly Review*
<http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

that the emphasis in the meetings is on democracy and that the residents of the shack settlements themselves should determine the direction of the struggle not external funders.¹³⁵

So why do these suspicions arise? I document the variety of attitudes to highlight some of the misconceptions of the Abahlali movement among unionists and also to suggest reasons for these attitudes and why these prevent them from adequately understanding these groups. This is not to say that if COSATU had a greater understanding of Abahlali it would naturally want to unite with them; it is argued that these misunderstandings reveal the extent to which COSATU is locked into a singular strategy of cooperation in Alliance corporatism, as I will elaborate in the next section.

It is interesting to note the assumption that groups such as Abahlali raising their concerns against the government immediately made COSATU defensive and wary of their intentions, if not openly hostile. Some went as far to brandish them “counter revolutionaries”.¹³⁶ Any group venting grievances outside of corporatist structures towards government policy, it seemed, must be an oppositional force to the ANC itself. COSATU’s assumption that these groups must be either directly opposing the ANC themselves, or somehow the pawns of external forces seeking to do so, highlights the lack of understanding of Abahlali’s struggle but more importantly, COSATU’s tendency to conceive political struggles outside official corporatist processes anti-ANC and thus,

¹³⁵ Abahlali Meeting at Kennedy Road Community Centre (21/06/06) and Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06) and also see Bryant, Jacob op. cit.,

¹³⁶ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06) and also discussions at COSATU, SACP, ANC May Day Rally at Curreys Fountain, Durban (01/05/06)

contrary to its own interests and strategy. Because COSATU has emerged as part of a liberation movement in Alliance with the ANC government it remains extremely sensitive to what it sees as direct challenges to the ANC itself. Despite its criticism of the ANC's political trajectory, COSATU remains firmly committed to cooperation in the corporatist structures of the Alliance as the best vehicle to further its members interests and to pursue its political goals. This severely restricts COSATU's ability to engage with groups like Abahlali and the potential for COSATU to wage its struggles outside of corporatist structures. The suspicions as to Abahlali's agenda are, I would argue, indicative of how COSATU struggles to conceive forms of struggle outside the logic of corporatism and an Alliance with the ANC. COSATU still perceives the Alliance as the only legitimate movement for change and immediately assumes that groups critical of government (whether locally or nationally) are hostile to the liberation movement as a whole.

Is COSATU Trapped in the Logic of Corporatism?

The unionists which I spoke to had failed to really define the purpose of the Abahlali movement and they were unable to understand *why* Abahlali did not use the Alliance structures in order to attain their goals for housing. What this fails to recognize is that groups like the shack communities feel they have been let down by official government structures and are isolated from the kind of corporatist arrangements that COSATU is a part of. It is this that leads Abahlali to take direct action such as its protest marches yet, as we shall see, COSATU are wary of such tactics and believe that

grievances should be vented through the “proper” channels. COSATU has underestimated Abahlali’s demands by reducing them to material demands of the local government for housing and services. This is indicative of COSATU’s inability to conceive of a strategy that is not centered on placing material demands on the government and bargaining through corporatist structures.

There was sincere sympathy amongst all the unionists I had contact with towards the plight of the shack communities and there was a genuine curiosity as to why Abahlali wasn’t using Alliance structures in order to pursue their demands. One shop steward told me “We feel for these guys, but the manner in which their struggle is *pushed*; its like we are fighting our own people who are government in the same way as we fought the people in the old regime, and we can’t block the road and use the vulgar language against our own people.”¹³⁷ This is very much in tune with Mbeki’s idea that it is unacceptable for citizens to take to the streets as they had done during the Apartheid struggle. I was told on many occasions that actions such as blocking the road were examples of Abahlali not behaving “responsibly” or even “acting in the ultra left tendency”.¹³⁸ One official commented that cooperating with groups outside the Alliance “can lead to internal problems because, you must know they are the ultra left, we are left....[but] we are members of the ANC, we are not here to [use] slogans [like] ‘away with the Alliance, the ANC has sold out’ all these kind of things.”¹³⁹ Once I told unionists about how Abahlali’s concerns had been ignored by the local government some of them responded with

¹³⁷ Interview with Biyela, Sbu – SAMWU Official – 22/05/06)

¹³⁸ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06) and also discussions at COSATU, SACP, ANC May Day Rally at Curreys Fountain, Durban (01/05/06)

¹³⁹ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06)

disgust, and one suggested that careerism within the ANC was a possible reason for the disrespect they showed these communities.¹⁴⁰ However, it is important to note that their initial reactions were to define Abahlali as being undisciplined or anti-ANC for not using Alliance structures.

It is important to analyse this discourse of “responsibility” and “discipline” because it underlies a fundamental weakness in COSATU’s current strategy. Because Abahlali operate outside of the constraints of Alliance corporatism, they are construed as “indisciplined” and portrayed as being bent on subverting the national development project. And because they are outside of the liberation movement and the corporatist strictures or “revolutionary discipline” that Alliance partners must practice they are seen as a loose cannon, one that acts in the “ultra-left tendency” and is therefore de-legitimised by Alliance discourse from the national level as being irreconcilable with the “disciplined” liberation forces such as the unions.

Although they did not use these exact terms, there was a tendency of the COSATU people that I spoke to of accepting the binary separation of those operating in the “legitimate” sphere (i.e. cooperating within Alliance structures and those operating independently of Alliance structures) when in fact Abahlali uses both cooperation and oppositional strategies. As Oldfield and Stokke have argued, neoliberalism has a variety of impacts on different sections of civil society and this creates a plethora of different resistance strategies that do not simply follow the binary separation between cooperation

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

and disengagement.¹⁴¹ At one stage Abahlali would invite a councilor to the settlement to discuss their issues and demand concessions. Once the councilor failed to listen to their concerns and told them that the policy of removing the shack settlements was an irreversible *fait accompli* they went on a march the next day, assuming an adversarial role in order to make their voices heard. Whilst COSATU has been critical over the ANC's leadership at the national level, often ignoring COSATU's demands, it has embarked on a defensive strategy by accepting neoliberal policies and then seeking to alleviate their worst affects upon its members in a disciplined manner instead of using militant action to oppose and derail neoliberal initiatives before they are enacted. This is symptomatic of COSATU's commitment to corporatist dispute-resolution procedures. Rather than using potentially damaging industrial action, COSATU attempts to secure concessions through mediation.

Unlike COSATU, however, Abahlali do not have access to such structures. For example, people in the Abahlali movement are not consulted during decision-making by the City and have had their attempts at engaging with the Ministry of Housing ignored.¹⁴² One activist from the Joe Slovo settlement complained that his attempts to talk to the local Ministry of Housing had been fruitless, "what they have been doing [is] referring me to one another and I ended up boycotting the project."¹⁴³ Whilst corporatism might allow some groups the chance to engage with government and influence policy, Adam et

¹⁴¹ Oldfield, Sophie and Stokke, Kristian *Political Polemics, Local Practices of Community-Organizing and Neoliberal Politics in South Africa*

¹⁴² See appendix and chapter four

¹⁴³ Abahlali Workshop for Provincial Indaba at The University of KwaZulu Natal (21/05/06)

al point out that such benefits are not enjoyed by marginalised sections of society.¹⁴⁴ Unlike COSATU, Abahlali do not feel they are able to vent their voices through Alliance structures and COSATU's insistence that groups like Abahlali should have used these structures betrays their failure to comprehend how some groups are still alienated from the state. It also highlights COSATU's one-dimensional strategy of cooperation within corporatist structures rather than utilising strategies that combine tactics of cooperation and opposition as complementary devices to advance a broader goal.

Another view that also prevailed among those I interviewed was that *Abihlali's* struggle was a single issue – housing – and that when their demand for housing was met then their issue would simply go away. It was dismissed by one unionist as a “seasonal” issue, one that failed to grasp the need for what he called a “comprehensive programme.”¹⁴⁵ Many of the unionists believed that Abahlali's protest emerged out of impatience. To quote one official:

We understand Abahlali's and other people's problems but we believe that they are impatient. The ANC has just taken over twelve years, people are impatient you know. They thought that as soon as we achieved democracy on the second day they would have a house.¹⁴⁶

Another remarked, “these people, they are impatient. Rome was not built in a day!”¹⁴⁷

COSATU officials mistakenly reduce Abahlali's struggle to the demand for housing and not one of them was aware of the concerns of the shack communities over issues such as where the houses would be built. One of the basic tenets of Abahlali's

¹⁴⁴ Adam, Heribert et al op. cit.,

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06)

¹⁴⁷ COSATU, SACP, ANC May Day Rally at Curreys Fountain, Durban (01/05/06)

campaign is that they do not simply want houses, but they want them in places near to their work so that they can sustain their livelihoods. People in the shack settlements are predominantly unemployed with respect to the formal economy yet their livelihoods include a wide range of activities such as informal trading and labouring that require them to be close to the city.

The unionists I spoke to tended to frame the issue in a simplistic, systematic sense. The problem: people want houses. The solution: go through government structures. What this fails to comprehend is that Abahlali's struggle extends beyond simply housing, or even housing in the right place. It is an attempt to make the local authority, and their local ANC councilors, listen and take heed from the communities rather than the other way around. It is not simply a demand that can be fulfilled once houses are built; it is a demand for a lasting transformation, albeit at the local level, of South African democracy. Their aim is to make those who govern accountable to those who elect them rather than for the people to determine what they may or may not rightfully demand from their government.

Unlike COSATU, Abahlali is not embedded in the logic of corporatism. Indeed, it is the corporatist structures of decision-making between "big business", "big unions" and the government that marginalises communities such as those at Kennedy Road from political processes. Abahlali is able to inhabit a space outside the corporatist model and are therefore not bound like COSATU is to its strictures. Whilst COSATU has accepted the neoliberal 'rules of the game', and what it can expect to reasonably demand and how it may go about attaining reforms, Abahlali's struggle is, conversely, far more broad

ranging. Their demands are not bound by the logic of neoliberal corporatism that reduces political conflict to a process of civil society ‘stakeholders’ placing delivery demands on the state; instead, Abihali exhibit a broader political strategy of democratizing South African society from below.

COSATU’s Blinkered Strategy

The unionists I spoke to were critical of the current ANC government’s attempts to centralise decision-making and felt that COSATU was not given the influence within the Alliance which it deserved. As one remarked to me that the working class were “out in the cold” and had little bearing over ANC policy.¹⁴⁸ Others commented that Mbeki’s style of leadership was “too centralised” and that economic policy was decided without COSATU’s input.¹⁴⁹ The feeling was that the ANC had been founded as an organisation for the poor which would protect their interests but that it had at some stage been “hijacked”.¹⁵⁰

It was interesting to note that whilst they lamented the fact that COSATU had not had the influence in the Alliance which it hoped for and they decried the lack of “worker control” over the government, they were concerned that to leave the Alliance would leave

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06) and discussions at COSATU, SACP, ANC May Day Rally at Curreys Fountain, Durban (01/05/06)

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06) Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06) Interview with Pakkies, Mthimobe – SAMWU Regional Deputy Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

COSATU without any political leverage.¹⁵¹ One official said “we cannot leave the ANC just how it is, in the hands of rich people who direct government policies for their own benefit.”(12) An interesting point to come out of my discussions with unionists was the differentiation of the ANC from the government. I was corrected on several occasions when I asked what they thought about the ANC’s neoliberal shift. I was told that, for example, “The ANC does not have the policy of GEAR, the *government* has a policy of GEAR.”¹⁵² It was often alleged that a neoliberal “clique” had emerged in government and was pursuing its own agenda. Lehulere believes that differentiating between the government and the ANC in such a way “absolves the ANC, as well as the ANC government, from responsibility for GEAR and provides a justification for criticising the failures of GEAR while at the same time arguing that the Alliance remains the only vehicle for addressing the poverty that is brought about by GEAR.”¹⁵³ Making a distinction between the ANC as a movement and the government externalises blame for the rightward shift of the ANC government on a bureaucratic clique within the government and the ANC had been “sold out” by this clique. This allows COASATU to continue justifying cooperation in Alliance corporatism as the only feasible strategy despite the rightward shift of the ANC government. As Desai has argued, community movements seeking “revolutionary confrontation....face a ANC which sensing the growing combativeness of the Poors have started to differentiate the ANC from government and the ANC as liberation movement, not to challenge the former but to try

¹⁵¹ *ibid*

¹⁵² Interview with Hlophe, Richard – SAMWU Organisor – (15/05/06)

¹⁵³ Lehulere, Oupa *op. cit.*, p.38

and head off challenges emanating from outside corporatist structures.”¹⁵⁴ This attitude tries to legitimate the idea that the ANC alone is the soul voice of the poor. It attempts to channel the demands emanating from civil society groups into technocratic requests of their “comrades” in government. If these “comrades” fail to adhere to their demands this *can* be criticised, but above all, the ANC as a liberation movement, and the corporatist structures of governance which it employs, remains unchallenged as the only legitimate channel through which civil society can voice its demands. COSATU maintains its principled dissidence towards neoliberalism but limits its resistance to demands for more influence *within* the prevailing neoliberal structures of governance.¹⁵⁵

The common sentiment emerging from the unionists I spoke to was that worker-control of the ANC had to be restored, and that what was needed was nothing less than “winning back” the ANC from *within* the Alliance rather than what they saw as the alternative of leaving the Alliance and “surrendering” the government to bourgeois control. Essentially this meant that the unionists still held the idea that the Alliance was the only appropriate vehicle to affect social change; to quote one COSATU official:

We understand the ANC is not a socialist organisation. It is not. It has adopted the understanding of the national democratic revolution to be culminating at one point to socialism, now they begin to talk as if they don’t understand that. Just because they want to push us out of the Alliance. We are not going to agree to that, we are not going to be pushed out. Instead our resolve and our work is to endure that the Alliance remains a very strong bridge.¹⁵⁶

Another shop steward told me:

¹⁵⁴ Desai, Ashwin (2002) *Neo-liberalism and its Discontents: The Rise of Community Movements in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28> p. 11

¹⁵⁵ Van Driel, Maria op. cit.,

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

People [in the ANC government] have been changed to the capitalist, opportunist, and all those things...they've got interests now, they've got things to defend...before we were talking about nationalisation now, it is privatisation. It is capitalism. They are eating, benefiting out of capitalism knowing full well that a number of people, actually the majority of this country, they are still deprived.... But the fact remains that we still believe that only the ANC can change that. It cannot be rectified outside the ANC.¹⁵⁷

Although they felt left “out in the cold” when it came to decision-making in corporatist structures, they believed that their best hope was to try and eek out more influence within these structures.¹⁵⁸ As one shop steward said to me: “It is very, very sad to hear the unionist say ‘let us make the ANC to be weaker friend’ – so they say ‘comrades we have to make sure that we make the ANC to be weaker’. What do you mean? ...why don’t you say ‘let us make the ANC to be worker controlled.’” Because of the sentimental commitment to the ANC and the perception that the Alliance remains the only means through which to advance both the interests of its members and progressive social transformation means that linking up with movements such as Abahlali is in no way inevitable nor is it seen as necessary or desirable by the unionists I spoke to. It should not be taken as a given that union members will automatically pressure their union leaders to link with these struggles. As Appolis states: “you can preach to them in the union, but there is no organic process acting as a catalyst.”¹⁵⁹ I detected a strong commitment to Alliance structures in my interviews despite an almost universal condemnation of the current policy direction of the ANC government. Although unionists might display a high

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Dlamini, Sdumo – COSATU Provincial Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (19/05/06)

Interview with Pakkies, Mthimobe – SAMWU Regional Deputy Chairperson KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

Interview with Mbhele, Lenford – SAMWU Regional Security Coordinator KwaZulu Natal – (30/05/06)

¹⁵⁹ “Pressing Challenges Facing the South African Labour Movement: an Interview with John Appolis and Dinga Sikwebu” in Bramble, T. and Barchiesi, F., (eds). *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*, (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003)

degree of empathy with the struggles of social movements, they remain committed to the Alliance as the only vehicle through which social transformation can occur. This was very apparent from the interviews and conversations I had with Durban unionists. This view is also propagated by the union leadership at the national level. One COSATU discussion document asserts that

Still, the Alliance remains the only weapon in the hands of our people to deepen transformation...We must not, because of the current situation and our frustration, throw away the only weapon our people have developed over many years in the trenches of struggles, in our communities and in our prison, in exile and internally. It would be class suicide if workers were to hand the ANC over to the bourgeois state.¹⁶⁰

The unions are extremely wary of new movements that are directly critical of the ANC government despite COSATU's own position as the left-most member of the Alliance that is itself critical of both ANC policy and the centralised, even autocratic style of the ANC government. However, one must take into account that COSATU has not simply been drawn into the logic of corporatism in terms of the degree of influence it can exert within an economic relationship between itself, the government and business; it is within the context of an Alliance that fought the liberation struggle side by side and can therefore endure despite lasting tensions over the government's economic trajectory.¹⁶¹

When I pushed them it was evident that the immediate strategy was to focus on the ANC presidential succession to ensure that *their* choice of leader for the ANC Presidency is chosen. This was invariably Jacob Zuma. Whilst because he is a Zulu, his support in KwaZulu Natal is extremely strong, there was also a strategic reason for their

¹⁶⁰ Naidoo, Prishani op. cit., p.22

¹⁶¹ Gumede, William Mervin op. cit., p.268

support of Zuma. They claimed that he was more “worker friendly” and would give COSATU a greater role. Several the unionists I spoke with said that there was “no way” Zuma could be pro-capitalist because he had seen what it had done to him during his recent trials. Another went as far to call him South Africa’s “Chavez”, stating that a radical redistributionalist agenda similar to that of the Venezuelan leader would be pursued under Zuma.¹⁶² As Desai has remarked: “This ‘Zuma moment’ revealed in humiliating fashion the dead-end of COSATU’s political strategy...”¹⁶³ Rather than pursuing links to movements outside the corporatist structures of the Alliance, COSATU remains intent on pursuing a one-dimensional strategy of trying to secure more influence within neoliberal corporatist structures.

Unfortunately this highlights the blinkered strategy that COSATU is now pursuing. It follows the strictures of Alliance corporatism as if no alternative path lay open to them. Although a strategy of winning back worker control of the ANC is a commendable objective, this must not be restricted to forwarding a more “worker friendly” president who may perhaps give COSATU marginally more influence *within* neoliberal corporatist structures. For the effects of the ANC government’s neoliberal strategy have, as argued before, profoundly weakened COSATU, forcing it to take a defensive, damage-limitation strategy towards dealing with neoliberalism. Taking back “worker control” of the ANC can only begin once the rightward shift of the post-1994 period is reversed. This can only happen if the ANC government is subordinated not only to COSATU and other leftist forces in the Alliance: it can only be truly achieved if the

¹⁶² Interview with Zondi, Nhlanthla – SAMWU Shop Steward – (18/05/06)

¹⁶³ Desai, Ashwin (2005) Shadow Boxing? Cosatu, Social Movements and the ANC government. *Centre for Civil Society* <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,28>

liberation movement as a whole is subordinated to the directives of its members, and, at the same time, those communities that are marginalised from politics.

Concluding Remarks

COSATU remains committed to evoke change from *within* existing structures and is extremely cautious about engaging with groups it perceives to be challenging its Alliance partner, the ANC. Cooperation in corporatist structures is seen as the only viable strategy as the Alliance is considered the only vehicle through which COSATU can protect the interests of its members and affect change in politics through its influence over the ANC government. COSATU's blinkered following of this corporatist strategy, has haemorrhaged COSATU's ability to conceive of alternative strategies for engaging with the post-apartheid state which use both strategies of cooperation and opposition. Instead of exploring linkages with groups such as Abahlali who present alternative relationships between the government and its constituents, COSATU remains committed to achieving more influence within existing neoliberal structures of governance. COSATU's strategies remain embedded in technocratic remedies of how to achieve greater protections and concessions for workers within the neoliberal paradigm. The failure to comprehend what Abahlali were struggling for perhaps highlights how COSATU has become embedded in the logic of making material demands of the existing corporatist structures of governance. "Winning back" the ANC and subordinating it to "worker control" might be an important short-term victory. However, the way this strategy is currently framed is at gaining more influence within the existing systems of governance, rather than a truly radical

conception of re-establishing working class control of government that envisions forcing those who claim to lead society taking their directives *from* society; both union members and more marginalised sections of the working class.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

COSATU adopted a strategy of cooperating in corporatist governance structures during the transition period that allowed it to advance its aim of securing immediate material and legal concessions for its members through bargaining. Its historic commitment to the ANC informed this strategy and the belief that through an Alliance in government the liberation forces could enact social transformation in South Africa that would begin to address the injustices of Apartheid.

However, it is my argument that COSATU has become trapped into this one-dimensional strategy of cooperation in corporatist governance and the mindset that the Alliance remains the only progressive vehicle for social transformation and advancing the interests of union members. Whilst corporatism might have seemed to be the logical solution during the transition period of the early nineteen nineties, this conception was premised on the social-democratic strategy of the Redistribution and Development Programme (RDP) that would allow greater labour-determination in corporatist structures. As the ANC adopted the neoliberal development strategy conceived in GEAR, COSATU's ability to influence the policy direction of the ANC was diminished and COSATU was forced to take on the role of "junior partner" to capital in corporatist institutions. This is because neoliberal development strategies prioritise above all else, the sanctity of "business confidence" that is deemed to be synonymous with economic growth, and thus development. Demands emanating from groups such as COSATU are

presented as sectional and are subordinated to the demands of neoliberal good governance.

COSATU has become trapped in the logic of corporatism, i.e. making material demands from the state and using bargaining rather than militancy to pursue its goals. Whilst it has been able to achieve some protections for its members through this strategy, the conditions for the workforce as a whole are gradually deteriorating as unemployment persists and casualisation and flexibilisation strategies lead to increasing job insecurities and retrenchments for those with jobs.

Abahlali presents a radical alternative to this strategy. Isolated from their local government and marginalised by the corporatist decision-making structures enjoyed by the likes of COSATU in the Alliance, Abahlali has sought to reclaim the ability for the people of the *imijondolos* to determine their own destiny. This involves subordinating the state to the people so that those who are elected to represent the poor take their direction from the poor. This challenges the discourse of the ANC that as leader of the liberation forces it alone can determine the national interest and that it is the singular representative movement of the poor.

Abahlali do not accept the dichotomy between cooperation and disengaged oppositional strategies. Whilst they make short-term demands from the state in order to alleviate the hardships the people of the *imijondolos* face, they also hold demonstrations to make sure their voice is heard. They see both these strategies as part of a greater

struggle, a “class struggle”, that will not be appeased by the state granting small material concessions. It is their commitment to being a poor-led, rather than an elite-led resistance mired in the logic of corporatism and asking for small concessions of the neoliberal state that make Abahlali’s “limits of the possible” defined by the poor themselves rather than the technocratic neoliberal paradigm.

Can COSATU reinvigorate itself as a political union by allying with these groups? It seems that a great deal of soul searching must happen first. Because it is so wrapped up in the logic of corporatism, informed by its alliance with the ANC, COSATU has the unfortunate tendency to shun movements that are deemed outside the legitimate realm of South African politics, i.e. outside or in opposition to corporatist governance. It also has become too embedded in the logic of corporatism that has reduced its goals to obtaining short-term concessions of the state within the neoliberal paradigm and has given up in all but name the goal of a broader emancipatory project for those outside its membership base. The trade unionists misconceptions of the Abahlali in Durban were perhaps indicative of how the unions have become mired in the strategy of making technocratic demands of government and their inability to engage with or conceptualise radical alternative projects.

Perhaps COSATU might not want to assume a broader political role, and it should not be assumed that this is not so. But if COSATU *does* seek to be a political player in South Africa, pursuing an emancipatory agenda for the working class as a whole it must ask itself:

- Can the battle for socialism be fought within corporatist structures that have strengthened the very neoliberal relations that have concentrated wealth and in the hands of a small elite: the very antithesis of socialism?
- If it is engaged in the fight for a creation for a new society, can this be achieved without engaging with groups like Abahlali, those who are themselves engaged in such a struggle and are in fact representative of the very people whom a new society would be built for?
- Is it “ultra left” to ask that those that govern are subordinate to the people who elect them?
- Is it “anti-ANC” to ask for the ANC to be a movement *for* the poor by taking its directives *from* the poor?