CAN HISTORY REPEAT ITSELF AS TRADE UNIONS REVERT TO BEING NASCENT AGAIN? LESSONS FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN LABOUR EXPERIENCE FOR YOUNG CANADIAN UNION ORGANISERS

Sakinofsky, Ian (presenting author)

isakinof@ryerson.ca

Ted Rogers School of Management, Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada

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Arguing that workplace rights and collective bargaining rights pre-dated political rights for most South Africans, the author tracks the emergence of the South African labour movement and subsequent broader political change in South Africa. Characterising the emergent South African trade union movement of the 1970's and 1980's as being of a more worker-ist nature than of a social union movement nature, the author postulates that a union focus on shop floor issues and shop floor democracy generated a meaningful social impact. It is suggested that a worker-ist focus on shop floor issues and on union democracy questions, such as was practiced to good effect in South Africa in the 1970's and 80's, might serve Canadian organisers well in their current environment, and in their need to challenge their existing regime.

The Watershed that was the 1981 Industrial Relations Reform in South Africa

In South Africa in 1981, an amendment to the Labour Relations Act abolished all racial distinctions with regard to trade union membership.

This made it possible for all workers to participate in the legal machinery set up for collective bargaining, which machinery included the prohibition of unfair labour practices. Arguably this also mandated a code of fairness and dignity in the workplace that was not universally (or even predominantly) followed in the apartheid environment of the time.

That was ten years prior to the 1991 revoking of the legal framework of apartheid, which followed the 1990 unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC), and it was thirteen years prior to the election of the ANC led Government of National Unity in 1994.

Albeit that several federations of black trade unions did exist at the time, it was also four years prior to the 1985 formation of the largest trade union federation currently in South Africa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a subsequent (and continuing) participant in the Government of National Unity.

The significance of the above 1981 amendment lay in the fact that, from that point on, within apartheid South Africa all workers had equal collective bargaining rights in the workplace. While the same could not be said of their political rights in South African society at large.

Subject to due process, every worker thereafter had the right to protection and voice in the workplace, and to elect their workplace representatives. This was notwithstanding the fact that the majority of them did not have the right to vote for political representation.

In a country whose ruling party was obsessed with legality, but not necessarily legitimacy, a conundrum was beginning to emerge. Racism was constitutionally legal, in terms of the apartheid legal apparatus, but within the labour relations legislation, it was not.

It can plausibly be argued that this unavoidable and public contradiction played no small part in the final unravelling of the apartheid constitution.

Did this occur as a result of a decade (or decades) of pressure from the labour movement, or was it simply the fact that due to internal and external political pressure, fissures were appearing in the apartheid wall, and the increasingly forceful labour movement was able to force its way through the cracks?

In any event, it was in the sphere of labour that this watershed of unconditional bargaining rights was achieved. In addition, during this period, both union leaders and union members became schooled in democratic procedures through their trade union involvement, and in many cases were becoming prepared for political roles. And in the years that followed, in the wake of these advances in the labour sphere, broader political changes were indeed achieved.

The Apartheid Regime

The age of South African apartheid is constitutionally past. However, at the enterprise level, and at the level of society, a history of racial inequity and social and economic injustice could not be, and was not, removed at the stroke of a pen. The drafting of a new constitution containing a Bill of Rights, the establishment of universal suffrage, and the 1994 election of the government of national unity, was surely a shift in the direction of the establishment of a fairer society . Nonetheless the country was still confronted by the challenge of balancing two potentially

incompatible standards, namely redistributive justice and dynamic efficiency (Standing,1996). And the South African Labour movement found itself facing the dilemma faced by any other union movement that has been in the forefront of a successful struggle to remove an oppressive regime i.e. what role should it now define for itself ? (Donnelly and Dunn, 2006)

The apartheid regime was particularly successful in creating and separating different population groups within South Africa. This separation is in large part responsible for the current, and unequal, distribution of people and skills and assets, well over 20 years after apartheid was revoked.

Industrial Relations Legislation and History

Initially the industrial relations legislation in South Africa worked in lock-step with the other legislative measures that laid the ground for apartheid, and ultimately enforced it. However as the 20th century progressed, the industrial relations legislation gradually veered in a direction that showed some consideration of the principles of free collective bargaining, and hence in that regard was inconsistent with the dogma of apartheid.

That said, the most notable characteristic of South Africa's industrial relations history remains the dualistic nature that it assumed during the period 1924 to 1979/1981. Namely that, during this period, one set of industrial relations statutes existed for black people and another set for people of other races.

The Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 made provision for registered unions and employers to negotiate within permanent Industrial Councils and to submit disputes to them or to Conciliation Boards, pursuant to a right to strike.

However the definition of employee, within the Act, initially excluded those workers whose service contracts were regulated by the "Native Pass Laws and Regulations" and similar legal measures of the time. This was subsequently extended to unequivocally exclude all Black workers from its provisions. Black workers then came under the jurisdiction of the 1925 Wages Act, and the extension of Industrial Council provisions, both of which served to entrench differential working conditions and wages for Black and White workers. This was also followed in 1953 by a further Act, the The Black Labor (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953, which continued to provide for separate treatment of Black workers.

Notwithstanding the progressive exclusion of black employees from the collective bargaining machinery, as stated above, it was not illegal for black workers to form or join exclusively Black trade unions. Donnelly and Dunn (2006, pg 4) saw this as part of the state's attempt to legitimize the apartheid framework: "Curiously, the apartheid state allowed Blacks to unionise out of deference to some warped voluntarist principle". Consequently during the course of the century a large number of unions and union federations were formed, in many cases outside of the statutory system; some for short periods of time, and some for longer.

The unions of this period have variously and respectively been described as: whites-only unions; blacks-only unions; non-racial unions (no reference to race); racial unions (different categories of membership for different races); craft unions (originally largely white membership; in fact, due to job reservation and the color bar, people who were not white were not necessarily able to ply certain trades); industry unions; general unions (almost entirely Black membership); community unions; emergent unions (unions formed in the early 70's and the years that followed, committed to black worker interests, and distinct from the established unions, who generally had links to the status quo); parallel unions (separate black unions set up and

frequently administered by, registered white unions); populist unions; workerist unions; traditional unions; registered unions; unregistered unions; affiliated unions (affiliated to union federations, that is); unaffiliated unions; conservative unions; and progressive unions.

The very fact that there are such a wide array of terms listed above, speaks to the (organic) nature of the development of the labour movement in South Africa, particularly from the early 1970's onward, although the roots of this movement date back to the beginning of the century.

In 1955 the non-racial South African Congress of Trade Unions came into being. Shortly after it was formed SACTU joined the Congress Alliance which was lead by the ANC - effectively becoming the trade union arm of the ANC. From 1957 onwards SACTU played a leading role in Congress campaigns (Friedman 1987). In so doing, Friedman argued, SACTU embarked on a course that led it away from factory battles towards a new role as the labour wing of the nationalist political movement.

With the banning of the ANC in 1960 and its decision to mount an armed struggle from exile, SACTU no longer had the same platform to operate from. While SACTU itself was never banned, many of its individual unionist members were, and it no longer had a presence in the country, even though it did continue to exist in exile. For most of the sixties black unionism was somewhat silenced in South Africa, with the only Black worker organizations being a small number of conservative parallel unions.

Friedman argues that SACTU's alliance with the nationalist movement weakened SACTU by forcing its members to fight a national political battle before they had the factory strength to do so. He contends that SACTU did not need to dedicate itself to the Congress movement in order to become political, and that through their factory battles SACTU members were already

becoming the most organized section of black society. By weakening that organization in the factories, Friedman feels the alliance with the Congress also weakened the workers ability to become a political force outside of the factories.

Bendix (2007) notes that by the early sixties the non-racial trade union movement representing mainly black employees, which had been established under the banner of SACTU, had disintegrated, and that it was only in the beginning of the 1970's that the black and non-racial trade union movement re-emerged. And it re-emerged under the auspices of various worker aid societies established in Natal, the Transvaal and the Western Cape. Bendix relates that in the Transvaal two white unionists dismissed by TUCSA in 1969 established the Urban Training Project with the purpose of promoting unionism amongst black employees; also in the Transvaal the Industrial Aid Society was established; in Natal a number of politically aware students established the Wages and Economics Commission, which in turn spawned the General Factory Workers Benefit Fund; and in the Cape the Western Province Workers Advice Bureau was established. These agencies provided advice, training and research to unions, and made their mark, by focusing on strong shop floor representation and recognition at plant level. To that end they also provided training and guidance to workers in forming 'Workers Committees', in their respective organizations, which they advocated as an initial form of workplace representation.

While the above were not unions themselves, they provided organizing support and counsel to fledgling unions, and did provide a launch pad for greater and more effective organizing in the seventies.

Supported by such initiatives, a strong shop floor based union movement began to develop in the early 1970's among Black workers following a series of relatively momentous, and unexpected

(by the employers that is) strikes in Durban in 1973, in which more than 100,000 workers, who did not have the right to strike, downed tools in support of higher wages. This reinforced the development of an emergent trade union movement, which would soon overtake the white trade union movement.

Immediately in the wake of these 1973 strikes the government amended the 1953 Black Labor (Settlement of Disputes) Act and renamed it the Black Labor Relations Regulation Act, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to make it more appealing to black workers.

In 1982 the Industrial Conciliation Act was amended to include all workers, and at that point the Black Labor Relations Regulations Act was repealed. There was now no longer any reference to race anywhere in the South African industrial relations legislation.

At this time, even though access to Industrial Councils was provided to all – or perhaps fostered by this new access - an increasing number of bilateral negotiations begun to take place between emergent unions and enterprises, leading to company-based or plant-based recognition agreements. In this way a dual industry versus plant/company-based bargaining system, with more grass roots involvement, was beginning to develop.

Such was the situation that was inherited by the ANC government in 1994.

In 1995 after the election of the ANC-lead Government of National Unity, the 1995 Labour Relations Act was promulgated. This legislation repealed and replaced the Labour Relations Act of 1956. It included the right to organise, the right to strike, limitations on replacement labour, the provision of agency shops and closed shops, the codification of unfair dismissal, and provisions relating to workplace forums. Bargaining structure was a voluntary issue but the Act

promoted centralized bargaining through the establishment of Bargaining Councils which replaced the former Industrial Councils and Conciliation Boards.

Unions as a Beacon for Democracy

The fact that there had been the removal of any reference to race, in the industrial relations legislation in 1981, at a time when the country was still pursuing a policy of Separate Development, is a tribute to the organizing activities of the labor movement at the time. What this implied, was that workers had secured for themselves, the right to levels of fairness and dignity, and equity, in the workplace, that they did not enjoy in South African society at large. Moreover workers gained confidence and skills from union organizing activities, and from making decisions and reaching agreements with management in the workplace. This translated into an ability to play leadership as well as follower roles in civic and community associations, and provided them with a familiarity with democratic decision making.

Black trade unions, and the black labour movement, did not exist in isolation of the general struggle against, and opposition to the apartheid system. There was much support given by the unions, and by union members, to community struggles, and there was also much support for the unions, from various community organizations. Also the (African National) Congress movement, in exile, played a large role in maintaining pressure on the South African government from abroad, and assisting in organizational efforts and funding on various levels.

This does lend credence to the use of the term "social movement unionism" as describing the activities of various trade union actors and unions within the black trade union movement, during the apartheid regime.

However notwithstanding the relevance or not of the "social movement unionism" epithet and its populist connotations, and whether or not it accurately reflects the role of trade unions at the time, it is apparent that labour relations legislation advances had been won, and that progressive workforce related behaviours were learned. In this regard union energies had clearly been directed at workplace issues too, in addition to the program of broader social and political change. And the workplace nature of the outcomes achieved may lead one to conclude that, de facto, unions did adopt a 'workerist' attitude to their challenges.

Elements of a trade union existence, which were introduced to union members and which guided their collective behavior and voice included the following:

insight into the recruitment process, and value of collective action;

the election of shop stewards;

union leadership accountability to membership;

membership voting protocols;

knowledge of procedural and substantive fairness;

an awareness of appropriate grievance and disciplinary procedures;

an appreciation of the value of hearings and evidence procedures;

the right to refuse unsafe work;

the development of assertive negotiation skills;

The appreciation and internalization of these elements during the 70's and 80's in South Africa, lead to the widening use of a democratic vocabulary amongst union members. Very possibly the spirit of this vocabulary also engendered a perspective of what constituted fair treatment in the workplace, and a consciousness that it was attainable. And this perspective gradually extended to the community at large. When street committees and civic associations were formed in both

formal and informal communities it was not uncommon for the leadership of these organizations to be union activists

This growing awareness within the ranks of union members may well have reflected what was referred to by some, at the time, as "conscientisation". Conscientisation is a term coined by Freire, a Brazilian education theorist, whose 1970 work The Pedagogy of the Oppressed was banned by the South African government after it caught the attention of the black consciousness movement in South Africa (Nekhwevha, 2002).

Woods (1977 pg. 145) quoted Steve Biko, a South African activist, as describing conscientisation as follows:

"Conscientisation is a process whereby individuals or groups living within a given social order and political setting are made aware of their situation. The operative attitude is not so much awareness of their physical sense of the situation, but much more their ability to assess and improve their own influence over themselves and their environment."

It is suggested here that the trade union movement, with its focus and training in worker advocacy, due process, representation, and collective bargaining, more so than a community orientation, evoked a degree of conscientisation amongst its membership that subsequently enhanced community organization and mobilization. In this regard it might be averred that in developing workplace industrial relations structures, black trade unions contributed to the creation of beacons of democracy that served as signposts for the broader democratic struggle.

In this vein Friedman (1987, pg. 2) commented that "In the 1960's and 1970's the factories, mines and shops were the often the places where Africans experienced white control most directly. In the 1980's, many factories mines and shops had become the only place where they

had won a share in decisions and so had won back some control over their own lives. Today, workers in hundreds of factories bargain with their employers and demand a say in all the decisions which affect them. The workplace is the only arena where whites and blacks negotiate on something like equal terms."

During the seventies the rate of striking and work stoppages in South African had increased considerably, adding to the pressure to reform the labour relations legislation. This continued through the 80's. During the course of the 80's industrial action increasingly took the form of stay aways and work stoppages, and consumer boycotts, in addition to more traditional types of strike actions, both lawful and unlawful – Could it be that this was now part of a broader struggle and no longer reflected the same workerist orientation that had given rise to the labour reform – which may well have spawned the larger groundswell of resistance?

In 1986, when addressing a group in Cape Town on 'the Independent Trade Union Movement in South Africa since 1973', Di Cooper, the Assistant Branch Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, had the following to say:

"At first the role of the trade union in this period (the early seventies) was to assert worker rights to organize at factory level, and to have representatives negotiating with management over their grievances. In these early years, unions were just starting to base themselves at the factory level, build up their organization and play the role of assisting workers at the factory level and ensuring their rights. It was really a matter of survival with emphasis on grassroots organization and democratic elections of worker representatives in each factory. At a later stage the shopsteward committees were to emerge from these democratic structures. From 1982 onwards as more trade unions became recognized the field of the area of conflict changed, and there are now not that many struggles over recognition. Some small companies still resist recognition of trade unions however management is obliged by law to recognize unions if they are representative in their factory. On the economic front, the struggle of trade unions has dealt with workers obtaining an increased say over their working lives, which until recently management had preferred to see as being their domain.

The following year (1987), David Lewis, then an organizer with the Transport and General Workers Union, in a public seminar at the University of Cape Town, when referring to COSATU's living wage campaign also addressed the broader context within which the trade union was operating:

"COSATU's response has been in the form of a campaign for a living wage. During the course of the campaign for a living wage COSATU has referred to the figure of R4.50 per hour as constituting such a living wage. R4.50 per hour is more than twice that which most black workers are currently earning, and while it is a serious demand it is not likely to be conceded to within the parameters of the existing system – and COSATU realizes that. What COSATU is actually demanding with their living wage campaign is the end of the economic system that governs South Africa.

It could be contended that there is enough wealth in South Africa to concede a living wage, but that those who control the wealth will not concede it. It is not a problem restricted to the immediate present but it is a problem that will also have to be faced by those who rule South Africa after liberation. Unlike most countries the working class in South Africa will have played a leading role in the process of liberation and they will expect to share in the benefits. For example, goldminers will expect a living wage as substantial recognition for their part in the process of liberation."

A few weeks later Ebrahim Patel, who was to become Minister of Economic Development, but was then the General Secretary of the University and Allied Workers Union again made reference to the democratic functioning of trade unions and to the broader context within which South African trade unions were operating:

"Progressive and independent trade unions operate in a hostile environment. They have the choice of either to dress up in three piece suits and meet management on their terms, or they can, as the new style, talk a language different to that of management. Due to the hostile environment within which they operate, progressive trade unions have chosen not to play the game that management is familiar with. Such unions reject management practices, and reject such management sources of information as salary surveys conducted by management consultancies. They look to their membership to see how they can turn their membership into their stongest motivation.

These unions open up channels of communication and the agenda of the membership base starts impacting on the leadership. The membership is given a say in the structure of the union. In COSATU every committee is only regarded as having a quorum if 50% of the people present are workers, and not full-time officials. An illustration of COSATU's attempts to communicate fully with all of its members is provided by the fact that a sophisticated translation service was introduced at its major congress to cope with the different languages spoken.

It is not possible for the union leadership just to switch off that power base which they have created in the membership. It is because of such democracy that many trade unions are forced to take a more political stance that the leadership would actually like , and it is not the other way round."

In1988 Alec Irwin, then the Education Secretary of COSATU (who subsequently served terms as Minister of Trade and Industry, and Minister of Public /Enterprises in the ANC government) made the comment that

" the only way the trade unions have survived is because they have been democratically structured. For that reason the trade union movement has grown. In South Africa those organizations that believe in a democratic future are only going to survive if they structure themselves democratically, and if all their members are completely committed to that structure."

Much of the above comments from the respective contributors is reflective of what Ulrich (2007) refers to as FOSATU's (the predecessor of COSATU) unique approach to trade union organisation, which she termed 'workers control'. According to Ulrich, this approach promoted non-racialism, industrial unionism, and a distinct form of direct democracy. For FOSATU, workers could only gain meaningful control over society if they created their own democratic organisations that were independent of nonworking class political alliances and were placed under their own command. Democratic trade union organisation was based on building solid structures at the workplace- the point of production where workers have the most power and authority.

Looking back it could possibly be hypothesised that the spine of the operational effectiveness of the unions at the time, was the workerist orientation, and that the broader social reach that they demonstrated derived its strength from such rigour in the workplace. To repeat Ulrich's point above this might speak to the importance of the their having "built solid structures at the workplace- the point of production where workers have the most power and authority".

The Triple Alliance

The establishment of the Triple Alliance in 1990 at the time of the unbanning of the ANC was a notable development in the South African transition.

In 1990 there were several Trade Union Federations in South Africa, but the most dominant was COSATU (The Congress of South African Trade Unions). COSATU was founded in 1985, and by 2015 COSATU's combined membership was 2.2 million grouped into 20 affiliated trade unions. This implied that COSATU alone had more members within its affiliates than all other unions and federations combined. The Federation was based on the following core principles, which were at the root of its organising campaign:

Non-racialism

Worker-control

Paid up membership

One industry, one union, one country, one federation

International worker solidarity

The above principles are largely process orientated i.e they entrenched a mode of operating which had thus far served the South African labour movement well. Further, the establishment of

the federation on those terms had demonstrated a desire to expand the scope of the affiliate unions, both in terms of their collective numbers, and also to provide a more integrated and louder political voice, while at the same time remaining true to their critical success factors.

In early 1990 the ANC, COSATU and SACP (The South African Communist Party) agreed to work together as an alliance - commonly referred to as the triple alliance.

This Alliance was in itself indicative of COSATU's readiness to play a political role, as well as its likely influence over national policy and international policy. The fact that the ANC was part of such an alliance also indicated its willingness to entertain a labor contribution, and its sympathy towards the South African worker. Finally the fact that the South African Communist Party was also a member of the Alliance indicates that the relationship between COSATU and the party in government is not necessarily a partisan one, and suggests that the presence of such a third party could serve as some form of conscience.

1994: NEDLAC (National Economic Development and Labor Council)

The first piece of legislation passed by the ANC government when it assumed office, was the Nedlac Act. of 1994.

Nedlac is a forum whereby representatives of government, labor, and business, as well as the community in certain instances, are required to consider all proposed labor legislation relating to labor-market policy before it is introduced in Parliament, and to consider all significant changes to social and economic policy before it is implemented or introduced in Parliament.

Nedlac is actually composed of four chambers - the Development Chamber, the Trade and Industry Chamber, the Public Finance and Monetary Policy Chamber, and the Labor Market Chamber. Different representatives of the four constituencies -organized labor, government, organized business, and the community, each represent their constituency in the respective chambers. position(s).

Labor in Nedlac is represented by COSATU, NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions) and FEDUSA ((Federation of Unions in South Africa) . Nedlac provided a place at (or near) the governing table for representatives, amongst others, of the labour movement, including those who had contributed to the movement for a new South Africa.

While the inclusion of the formerly 'emergent' labour movement in this forum to oversee legislation and development of national policy represented something of a victory for organized labour in South Africa, it also contained (possibly concealed) the horns of a dilemma: as stated earlier in this paper, the union movement now had to define a role for itself. To determine how, or whether, to represent its members interests, while playing an active role in national governance. Donnelly and Dunn (2006) appear to recognize the ambiguity of the situation, as well as its tactical component, by describing Nedlac as a corporatist attempt to achieve labour market reform while at the same time transforming the economy.

The Situation in 2015

Within South Africa there are currently four large union federations (COSATU being the largest), plus another 19 smaller federations, plus a large number of unaffiliated unions. There are 181 registered unions. 47 Bargaining Councils are registered. Total union membership is

nearly 3.3 million workers. This represents a union density of 32% . Both union membership and union density have been declining in recent years.

South Africa is now confronting burgeoning unemployment, rising inequality, widespread poverty, allegations of corruption, and an informal sector that represents a disproportionately large portion of the workforce, and an increasing rate of strike activity.

The balance of power within the Triple Alliance between the ANC, the Communist Party, and COSAtU has been maintained during the first twenty years of ANC government, but the relationships and alliances between the parties to the Alliance have been vexing. Concerns have been expressed that COSATU is too beholden to the government to function as an independent union federation. And certain COSATU affiliates such as NUMSA (the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa) have been straining on COSATU's leash, to the point of NUMSA's expulsion from COSATU in November 2014. While another of COSATU's prized unions, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) has been seriously challenged on many fronts by the emergence of the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), an erstwhile breakaway from COSATU in 1998, that is now affiliated witih NACTU. The respective responses of both NUM and COSATU and the ANC (and the extent to which the police force and the employers in question were also implicated), in attempting to thwart AMCU's successful attempts to attract mineworkers away from NUM and champion the mineworkers' cause, exposed the compromised role that COSATU had long been observed to be playing within the Triple Alliance.

Again the question is encountered as to how, or whether, a union, or a union federation, can represent its members' interests, while playing an active role in national governance.

Very early in the first term of ANC government COSATU's tightrope-walking skills in this regard had been called upon. In 1996 in the wake of the ANC government's launch of its Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), the government had embarked on a macro-economic strategy, referred to as the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR).

Some of the elements of GEAR were hard to reconcile with COSATU's commitment to the Freedom Charter. These elements included the government's commitment to conservative deficit targets, which meant real spending cuts, the government's commitment to ending exchange controls, the government's commitment to high interest rates as a means of controlling inflation, preserving the value of the South African rand, and defending foreign exchange reserves.

There was also an emphasis on privatization, reference to labor market flexibility as a means to create jobs, and an emphasis on the role of the market and of business confidence in generating private sector investment as the engine of economic growth.

In this way COSATU was drawn into a system in which the social development targets set out in the RDP, such as job creation, services, public sector investment, and investment in human resources, were in danger of becoming secondary, and where an objective of fiscal discipline might be substituted for the ultimate objective of development.

Essentially the question may be reduced to one of whether a labour movement would be more effective were it to maintain its independence and constantly challenge a government, or whether it would be more effective were it to cooperate with government and then be able to influence policy from within.

Some years later Pillay (2011) described the situation that had subsequently developed, as one in which COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were working class allies who

shared a long term interest in a socialist development path. However on the one hand he characterized COSATU as being unhappy with ANC corruption, conservative macroeconomic policy, creeping social conservatism, threats to civic liberty, and the ANC's inability to address unemployment and inequity. On the other hand he characterized the SACP as unconditionally backing the ANC government as the preferred vehicle for change..

Pillay suggested that COSATU had honoured its social movement union roots to some extent, to the degree that it supported public sector strikes, stayaways in protest against labour broking and tolling of highways, and did provide opposition to the government's Protection of Information Bill. COSATU also took a principled stand against corruption within the ANC. Furthermore COSATU did produce economic policy proposals which it hoped would influence the final New Growth Plan - an economic document that it was hoped would correct some of the misgivings harboured by COSATU with respect to GEAR and the failure of the RDP. COSATU's proposals, in this regard, encouraged greater state intervention, income redistribution, sustainable development and regional integration. When the plan was released in 2010, the COSATU response to it was somewhat muted, demonstrating COSATU's disappointment with the document and its neoliberal underpinnings, as against the SACP's uncritical endorsement of it.

On the other hand Pillay pointed out that by being a party to the Triple Alliance, and by participating in Nedlac, and its ultimate endorsement of the ANC leadership, COSATU might very well be playing a narrower political unionism role, and rendering itself something of a prisoner of its relationship with the governing party. In this regard it may have compromised its independence and commitment to mass action where necessary, and could not likely forge links with movements critical of the government. More significantly this could undermine COSATU's commitment and willingness to function as the democratic voice of its membership. This because

it was now something of a servant to its political master, or at least its political alliance. Thereby further compromising its existence as an independent labour actor. The fact that COSATU membership is located amongst the relatively privileged workers, and the Federation has not taken meaningful steps to address the needs of the informal sector, and of the unemployed, and that as a member of the establishment the COSATU leadership may enjoy some patronage effects, also may serve to dampen the Federation's social movement credentials.

It does appear that COSATU has not maintained the workerist fundamentals that had placed it on a sound footing.

The final question that then comes into play, is what alternative path could a federation such as COSATU, and its affiliate unions have followed in such a situation? And by extension, as per the following section, what is the lesson therein, for Canadian unions should they too want to conscientise their members with a view to initiating a trajectory of socio-economic change?

The Perspective of Young Canadian Organisers of the Current Union Climate in Canada

The overall unionization rate in Canada has fallen from an all-time high of 38% in 1981 to 30% in 2014.

There was a decline of 2% during the 1980's, another 6% during the 1990's, and then small oscillations around 30% in the period from 2000 to 2015. Virtually all of this decline can be attributed to a decline in the private sector union density, which has fallen from 26% in 1984 (Akyeampong 2004) to 16% in 2014. It is the stability of the public sector unionization, that dates back to the 1960's (Eaton 1976), that has maintained the overall union density around 30%

As per the following data provided by Statistics Canada (2015), in 2014, of a total Canadian workforce of 15,076,900 employees, the percentage of employees in the public sector who were covered by a collective agreement was 74.7% (2,651,100 employees) while the percentage of employees in the private sector who were covered by a collective agreement was 16.7% (1,935,900 employees).

Furthermore the union density and union coverage was not evenly distributed across Canada. In the province of Ontario which is the most populous province in Canada, with a workforce of 5,822,400 employees, the percentage of employees in the public sector who were covered by a collective agreement was 70.6% (922,100 employees) while the percentage of employees in the private sector who were covered by a collective agreement was 14.4% (650,300 employees).

In Alberta, the province where the country has invested heavily in the energy, the percentage of employees in the private sector who were covered by a collective agreement in 2014 was 8.7% (164,200 employees)

Males and females have not experienced the same decline. Male union density has declined from 42% in 1981 to 29% in 2012, and female union density, after rising fairly quickly through the 1970's to 31% in 1981, has remained fairly stable at 31%.

The decline in unionization has also been more pronounced amongst younger workers. Whereas in 1981 the difference in the unionization rate between employed people aged 17-24 (26%) and those aged 55-64 (42%) was 16 percentage points, by 2012 that difference had widened to 21 percentage points (15% and 36%).

Galarneau and Sohn (2014) note that the shift in employment from industries such as construction and manufacturing, to industries with lower unionisation rates, such as retail and

professional services does explain some of the total decline in unionization rates. However they point out that some changes have also occurred within certain industries. For instance they state that the rate has declined in some goods-producing industries, such as manufacturing and utilities (although utilities do rank as one of the higher union-density sectors, because many of these positions are within the public sector) , as well as forestry, mining, oil and gas. Within services-producing industries Galarneau and Sohn (2014) observe that management, administrative and other support services have increased their unionization, but that has been partly offset by decreases in information, culture, and recreation, as well as transportation and warehousing. As would be expected, with the high degree of public sector unionization, the sectors with the greatest union density in Canada are Public Administration, Education, Health Care, and Utilities.

In March 2015, the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce released a report stating that 'job quality' was at a record low in Canada,and that "this drop in quality was probably more structural than cyclical in nature" (Tal 2015). This report stated that whereas full-time job growth is an important indicator of job quality within Canada, since the 1980's the number of part-time jobs had increased much faster than the number of full-time jobs. It was also reported that in the previous year the number of self-employed workers had increased at a rate four times faster than the number of paid employees.

With respect to full-time jobs it was reported that "the number of low-paying full time jobs had risen faster than the number of mid-paying jobs, which in turn rose faster than the high-paying jobs" (Tal 2015). The author further commented that his findings "had implications for unions, because the fastest growing segment of the labour market was also the one with the weakest bargaining power"

It is felt by many labour activists in Canada that this climate of diminishing opportunities and increasing unemployment coupled with Government legislation and neoliberal government policies, is increasingly limiting the scope and perceived relevance of trade unions.

Together with co-researcher Rachel Butler, in 2014 the author of this paper undertook an investigation of young Canadian union organisers to determine their perspectives of their own roles/jobs, and their perspectives of the Canadian labour movement in general. At the time of writing, ten subjects had been interviewed. The subjects, ranged in age from 25-35 years old, were all residents of Ontario and represent seven different unions. Six were female, and four were male.

Seven were professional organisers, employed by a union, and three were employees at workplaces where they were leaders of organising drives.

Sectors in which they organised included: retail, manufacturing, food services, hospitality, delivery, shipping, professional occupations, education, media, and health care.

These organisers expressed frustration with the diminishing presence of the labour movement in Canada, and with their own respective unions' (un)willingness and (in)ablility to challenge the status quo. The investigators recognised that in this frustration, some parallels could be found between the current state of private sector unionism in Canada, and the situation that prevailed in South Africa in the 1970's and 1980's.

Characteristics of the organisers

The union organisers that participated in this study were all found to be strongly motivated to help people in workplaces find a voice on order to help themselves. A strong sense of social

justice seemed to fuel their efforts, and they almost all expressed a desire to make a difference in the lives of the people that they organised.

They all expressed leftist sympathies, and the oppression that they perceived in workplaces, weighed heavily upon them. There was also an almost universally expressed attitude that workplace oppression was systemic and that the (economic?) 'system' needed some sort of overhaul.

The subjects all expressed strong support for unions as a fundamental vehicle for empowering workers and giving them voice. As one of them commented, something needed to be done on behalf of these workers, i.e there was a need to push back against whatever it is that is oppressing people, and even though he/she was not necessarily convinced that unions are geared to provide the solutions sought by new members, unions were the vehicle of choice.

The subjects all expressed frustration with the bureaucracies within their own unions, referring to top-down decision making structures that they felt were not responsive to their own suggestions, nor the needs and wishes of new and potential members. They found their johs as organisers to be very physically and psychologically demanding, requiring considerable personal sacrifices. This was intensified by the politically hostile environment in which they found themselves operating, as well as by the negative myths and cynicism associated with unions.

Their jobs did bring (rare) highs at times of campaign successes, but much more frequent lows. Company propaganda and frequent two-faced management dispositions with adversarial undertones, and the tensions accompanying the organising of new workplaces, added to the stress. And all of this was imbued with a sense of struggle in response to the frequent low levels in employment standards, job security and respect, which they witnessed at their organising sites.

One of the subjects commented that “people don’t sense that victory is possible”. Here possibly some value may be gained from juxtaposing this 2015 lack of confidence, with the challenges and circumstances addressed by the emergent South African unions of the 1970’s and 1980’s, where too, valued outcomes could also have been regarded as being so far out of reach.

The organisers’ views of their respective unions and the labour movement in general

With respect to the labour movement at large, the general disposition of these subjects is that the current labour movement is behind the times. In fact their collective opinion seems to suggest, in the words of one, “that unions are changing with the system rather than changing the system”; and in the same vein another commented that “unions are collaborating with a system that creates the inequality and oppression that workers live with daily.”

Concern was expressed that unions seem to have diminished commitment to young people, and something of a disconnectedness to people in general. They were consistently referred to as not reflecting the general working population, with a frequent white male leadership even though their membership is diverse, and nonetheless equity programs were seen to take a back seat. It was suggested in a number of instances that unions were challenged to address the dominant (capitalist) thought and determine what they could do to change it.

One subject offered that “unions do not reflect their membership nor the interests of their current members; the union movement has a lack of progressive thought”.

In sum a mindset emerged of a feeling that to some degree their unions are failing them, and that even though they operate through the agency of their unions they themselves are more committed to social change for workers, rather than the advancement of Unions. This was

reflected in one subject's comment that ideally "unions should focus more on social need than organisational triumph".

A final impression was created that most of the players in the labour movement are just tired. The younger generation organisers are fatigued by the demands of their work and their expressed frustration with their union leadership, and the older generation is established in their ways or perhaps jaded by their years of experience. The question does arise as to whether the fatigue of the senior players is stifling the energy of the next cohort.

Emerging from these interviews, and from a review of the state of unionization in Canada, is an image of union organisers and union organisations who need to be re-booted in some way. It is suggested that the earlier described example of the South African union movement in the 70's and 80's, with its arguably 'informed workerist' foundation, might provide a model in this regard.

Conclusion

The experience of the emergent trade unions in South Africa does suggest that in similar fashion, despite having lost ground steadily over the last three decades, Canadian unions are capable of making a meaningful difference in Canadian society.

In that spirit, and also bearing in mind the other question that was posed earlier, namely what alternative path could a federation such as COSATU, and its affiliate unions have followed in the post-apartheid situation, it is suggested that Canadian organizers could indeed learn from the South African experience. Specifically the workerist approach that was successfully applied by South African unions in the 1970's and 80's does provide an organizational model that would serve Canadian organisers well.

In addition, and more specifically, the observation of the South African experience pre-versus post- the end of apartheid, may give parties pause to ponder over the role to be played by trade union federations, such as COSATU. This is of interest to Canadian trade union organizers, because the absence of centralized bargaining in Canada means that most collective bargaining takes place between locals of large unions and individual employers. In the lives of these union locals, where they are part of large wide-ranging unions, their parent-unions play a role that can sometimes be equated to that of the union federations in South Africa. There are also regional and national federations in Canada to which both locals and parent unions are affiliated, and this further increases the possible relevance to the Canadian observer, of the role played by trade union federations in South Africa.

Taking COSATU as an example, the role of union federations in South Africa may well have been a critical factor in the differing fortunes of their affiliate unions, pre and post-apartheid.

In retrospect, the primary purpose of the respective trade union federations in South Africa might originally have been, in fact, to bolster their affiliate locals in their mastery over workplace deals. However as has been described above, in recent years COSATU's priorities seem to have been divided between the needs of its affiliates and their members, and its obligations to the governing parties.

In the above sense, if viewing the trajectory followed by COSATU, it can be construed that when Federations serve locals, and not the other way around, they are less likely to become separated from their members, and solidarity might be enhanced. It follows then that a federation in so serving its locals (unlike contemporary COSATU), would be unlikely to find itself in a situation

where it serves both a political master and its members, and where it is torn between conflicting objectives.

This does not preclude the possibility that, to the extent that they serve their locals well, federations (on behalf of their locals) would still have political capital to spread around.

Advice to interested parties, such as Canadian organisers, then becomes that of modelling a strategy on the approach taken by the South African emergent union in the 1970's and 1980's. Whereby the union activists had a clear idea of the broad societal impediments that they were targeting, and the system changes that they were seeking, and approached individual workplaces with a view to achieving changes in that workplace that presumed the new dispensation they were visioning. To the extent that they could count on the backing of their federation in this workplace focus, their impact was likely to resonate further.

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