

UNITY

ALMOST three years of delays and bitter wrangling among union leaders working towards a federation of the country's emerging unions ended earlier this year.

And on June 12 the final constitution of the new federation was thrashed out by the six union groupings which are still part of the unity initiative which began at Langa near Cape Town in August 1981.

These groupings — the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu), the Council of Unions of South Africa (Cusa), the General Workers' Union, the Food and Canning Workers' Union, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union (Ccawusa) and the Cape Town Municipal Employees Association — are likely to link up early next year into the most powerful united body of mainly black workers this country has known.

Their breakthrough has come at a time of rapid and bewildering change in the South African union scene — perhaps the most intense in the 11 years since the Durban strikes of 1973 heralded in a new era of black trade unionism.

At the heart of all this change is the reality that trade unions have to have organisation and muscle on the shopfloor to be able to survive as viable bodies fighting for the interests of their members.

Many of the older established unions long ago neglected building strength on the shopfloor by opting for participation in official bargaining forums and for closed shop agreements which compelled workers to belong to them.

Some of the newer unions have chosen another extreme. By limiting their union activity to press statements and political rhetoric they have as small a foothold among workers as the older generation of predominantly Tucsa (Trade Union Council of South Africa) unions.

Between Tucsa, the fringe unions and the right-wing all-white unions, South Africa's trade union movement is deeply divided — on racial, ideological, class and skills lines.

Starting from the right, there is the Confederation of Labour, a dwindling group of all-white unions. Once the most powerful union grouping in the country and very close to the Nationalist government, they are now fighting a rearguard action against the government's labour reforms.

Perhaps the most powerful union in this group is Arrie Paulus' Mine Workers' Union which is successfully resisting the scrapping of racial job reservation on the mines — the last preserve of white worker privilege in South African industry.

In the middle of the road is Tucsa. Long regarded as a dilute liberal opponent of the government, since 1979 Tucsa has become the establishment union grouping.

Its affiliates now include rightwing unions which have recently gone multi-racial such as the Mine Surface Officials Association and the Artisan Staff Association.

But the bulk of Tucsa's support lies with the large "compulsory" unions such as the Garment Workers Union of the Western Province which on its own has some 60 000 members locked into a closed shop agreement.

While much of the changing support in Tucsa — which would explain its gradual lurch to the right — is coming from the former all-white unions on the right, it is being forced to adapt to head off the challenge from the emerging unions.

At last year's congress — which was marked by vicious attacks on the emerging unions and by a resolution calling on the government to ban unregistered unions — Tucsa doubled its affiliation fees.

This was seen as an attempt to pay for beefed-up services with the aim of fighting off the emerging unions who are increasingly touching sides with Tucsa unions in a fight for membership on the shopfloor.

But since affiliation fees have doubled seven unions have withdrawn from Tucsa, including the important S A Boiler-makers Society, probably the largest union in the country.

And the rivalry between established and emerging unions has worsened, particularly in the garment and textile industries.

One of the most important of the established unions, the Garment Workers Union of South Africa, is to join forces with the GWU (WP) — under fire at its Cape Town base as never before — to form a national garment workers union.

The growth of the emerging unions — putting them increasingly into conflict with the established unions — is likely to be accelerated by the new federation which could coincide with the lifting of the recession and an accompanying fresh wave of worker militancy.

Talk of unity among all emerging unions has been going on since the seventies, but the outcome of unity moves then was the creation of two union co-ordinating bodies — Cusa and Fosatu with a number of other unions left unaffiliated.

As an exercise in drawing together all these unions as well as the new generation of unions which sprang up in the eighties, the new federation has not been a startling success: its breakthrough earlier this year happened precisely after it had shed some unions.

The renewed vigour of the unity moves, which came after talks appeared hopelessly deadlocked at the beginning of the year, followed the removal in March of three

unions from participation in the talks — the South African Allied Workers' Union (Saawu), the General and Allied Workers' Union (Gawu) and the Municipal and General Workers' Union (Mgwusa).

Excluding the industrially-based Mgwusa these unions — all participants in the unity talks since they began in 1981 — were, on the basis of not being ready for a federation because they were not industrial unions, offered observer status only by the other unions.

All three refused to accept this and left the talks, claiming they had effectively been expelled. They have retained their stated commitment to unity.

One union, the Motor Assembly and Component Workers Union of South Africa (Macwusa), who were not present at the March meeting, have accepted observer status at the talks.

Meanwhile, many of the other general unions have accepted the principle of becoming industrial unions.

One, the Pretoria-based National General Workers Union, has set the end of this year as the deadline for its demise and has already started forming itself into industrial unions.

Meanwhile, in Johannesburg a separate grouping of seven black-consciousness-leaning trade unions has formed itself into an alliance which they hope to develop into a new federation.

The support of these seven unions — which include the Insurance Assurance Workers Union, the Black Allied Mining and Construction Workers Union, the African Allied Workers Union and the Black General Workers Union — is difficult to gauge.

One thing is certain. The unions who are going into the non-racial federation represent the vast majority of unionised workers in the black and non-racial unions.

While publicly-proclaimed membership figures are seldom an accurate guide to actual strength, these six

groupings represent more than 300 000 workers.

They have the strongest unions on the mines (the Cusa-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers); in the retail sector (Cawusa), in the motor industry (Fosatu's National Automobile and Allied Workers Union); in the food industry (the Food and Canning Workers Union, Fosatu's Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union and Cusa's Food, Beverage Workers Union); in the transport sector (the General Workers Union and Fosatu's Transport and General Workers Union); and in the metal industry (Fosatu's Metal and Allied Workers Union and Cusa's Steel, Engineering and Allied Workers Union).

The new federation will also be a means of preventing demarcation disputes between unions and of pooling resources to initiate organisation in the largely unorganised sectors such as farm workers, railway workers and domestic workers.

Its stated aim will be to provide a common front of black workers against the 'state and capital'.

But while this principle is being upheld, there is still fraying at the edges — particularly as a result of the recession and the hammering many of the unions have received in the past 18 months.

There have been reported splits, breakaways or expulsions in Saawu, Cawusa, Mawu, Macwusa, the GWU, and several other unions.

The most dramatic and widely publicised of these has been the expulsion of Mr Sam Kikine, the former general secretary of Saawu, and two of the union's other leading former officials.

Mr Kikine and his cohorts refused to abandon the union offices and continued to operate as Saawu officials.

A court case to get them ousted has failed and, according to Mr Kikine, a new election is being held to re-elect executive members of Saawu. □

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