

Preparing ourselves for permanent *independence*

In the last edition of Labour Bulletin, leading SACP member Jeremy Cronin criticised SACTWU general secretary John Copelyn's views on trade union independence and the 'two hats' debate. In this article, JOHN COPELYN responds.*

Cronin argues that I used our debate about wearing two hats to "brief personnel managers" on an internal union issue.

I did not in any way discuss details of this "debate" with employers at the time. However, if we are to debate the 'two hats' issue properly in *Labour Bulletin*, it seems appropriate to do so now.

"Using our debate"

The so-called "debate" developed in the following way.

The SA Communist Party secretly approached a number of leading COSATU figures and told them the central leadership of the SACP wanted them to serve on the Internal Leadership Group (ILG) of the party,

which was to be announced at its 29th July rally.

Either this was done very late in the day, or all comrades concerned were asked not to discuss the matter in the union movement until very late in the day. Whichever way this happened, there was no debate whatsoever in COSATU Executive structures prior to 29 July. The NUMSA Executive was advised of the development the day before the rally.

We were forced into a situation where several very prominent unionists were announced as SACP national leaders without any discussion on whether this was advisable. This debate was immediately made known to personnel

managers, the state, and of course other COSATU leadership through the national press the same day. In other words, there was no internal debate before it was made public!

From there, the matter raised itself for the first time in about September or October at a COSATU Exco** meeting. The Vice-President of COSATU (who to all intents and purposes is the most senior and public worker leader in COSATU) informed the meeting as a courtesy that he would be representing the party in the first meeting of the political committee of the COSATU/ANC/SACP alliance. This committee - with seven delegates from each organisation - is the key

* see John Copelyn, 'Collective bargaining: a base for transforming industry'

** Exco consists of COSATU national office-bearers plus two delegates from each affiliate

structure of the alliance, its politburo in fact.

It was argued that COSATU had no right to interfere with the party's choice of delegation, unless COSATU had itself chosen the comrade to represent it in the alliance meeting before the party made its choice. To make matters worse, it was by then clear that the majority of delegates who had been appointed at an earlier meeting to represent COSATU in this alliance structure, were now members of the SACP ILG. The person who should have been our leading spokesperson was now to represent the party in its dealings with us. And our actual representatives who were to represent us in all our dealings with the party, were at the same time on the ILG of the party!

When this was challenged it was argued that the Exco did not have the power to change the COSATU appointments to the alliance meetings. The reason advanced for this was that the appointments had been made by the COSATU Central Executive Committee (a higher body) in July, even though it had not been known at the time of their appointment that, in the next week or two, it would be announced that they were part of the SACP leadership.

This is obviously not an acceptable way of:

- Debating issues
- Respecting the independence of trade unions
- Running an alliance

Small wonder that several unions in COSATU began



SACTWU's John Copelyn
Photo: William Motlala/Afrapix

expressing real concern at these developments and began adopting resolutions attacking the whole idea of national union leadership conducting itself in this way.

According to Cronin, however, this concern is just a personal ideological quirk. Worse, simply offering an opinion to an Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) conference that such opposition would probably grow into the dominant position within the trade union movement, is a betrayal of the internal character of "our" two hats "debate"!

On infantile leftism

Vilifying people in the movement as traitors is unfortunately a long-standing tradition of many activists around the world. While the SACP says it is changing its approach to debate, it is really disappointing to find one of its leading spokespeople falling back at the earliest opportunity on the classic Stalinist techniques of smearing

individuals and alleging they are guilty of some breach of a duty of secrecy.

In response, I would simply point out there were several people from the ANC and COSATU other than myself who addressed the IPM conference, including Thabo Mbeki, Marcel Golding and Tito Mboweni. None of us were acting treacherously. I was acting with the full knowledge and approval of my union and I am sure others mentioned were acting likewise on behalf of their organisations.

In addressing major industrial relations conventions of employers, unionists do not "sell" the union movement to the class enemy. They simply seek to influence employer opinion on issues they feel are important to the union movement.

In my case, I was putting forward arguments that we should encourage centralised bargaining in each industry and negotiation between the trade union movement and capital on broad socio-economic issues. Both these issues are central objectives of the trade union movement presently and it is quite inappropriate to suggest the paper was some devious "trade off" or "generous sharing of information" with employers.

In part, I am not surprised that this is how some party people think. It comes from years of 'democratic centralism' practice where the only debate a good comrade engages in is inside



the Party. Let me quote a more extreme example of such intolerance towards different views.

A few weeks ago a trade unionist at a COSATU Eastern Cape Regional Congress put forward some difficulties with the functioning of the alliance in the context of discussion about dual leadership. Raymond Mhlaba, chairperson of the ILG responded curtly: "We have had an alliance for decades. Those who challenge it are mischief makers and need to be brought before a people's court."

This approach is what needs changing in the party if it is to emerge from the years of illegality and become part of open and vibrant debate.

Are union members from other political tendencies welcome in COSATU unions?

Having mercilessly slain several red herrings, Cronin discusses whether it is desirable for union leaders to double as SACP leaders. Essentially, he claims the wide experience of SACP leaders doubling as ANC

leaders is likely to guarantee that union independence will not be threatened.

Unfortunately things are not this simple. The trade union movement has drawn into its ranks tens of thousands of workers who don't support the ANC and even more who don't support the SACP. We cannot ignore lessons from other union movements which have operated among workers who were politically divided.

In Italy, for example, a united union movement was split into opposing ideological components because union leadership doubled as leadership of political parties. While they have in the end come to adopt detailed "rules of incompatibility" for union leadership, which essentially say "no two hats", the damage has already been done (see *SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 15 No 3).

The question confronting union leadership is not how many hats can they wear without confusing their membership about where they got a mandate from. The question is: what is the best way to build a united trade union movement confident in



its ability to advance the interests of all its members?

The first and foremost requirement is to ensure the union engages independently in the formulation of worker demands that unite its membership, notwithstanding the political division among such members. Second, it is essential that union leadership is seen by the union membership to represent all sectors of that membership, including those who do not support, for example, the SACP. Clearly this is not possible where the key union leadership doubles as SACP leadership!

Italian worker now have the privilege of *three* union federations, divided according to political tendencies, each operating in the same industry. This sort of divided labour movement is utterly unnecessary in South Africa. There is every prospect of uniting workers into a single union movement, provided the unions are led in a manner which ensures that loyal union members with different political views feel comfortable within a broadly-based union.





Does alliance politics imply dual leadership roles?

Photo: Abdul Shariff

Alliance politics - or dual leadership politics?

But there is a further problem with dual leadership. What if a fundamental disagreement arises between some organs of civil society (such as trade unions) and a political party?

If one assumes that the party has a monopoly of political wisdom and correctness, such disagreements either cannot arise, or would constitute 'false consciousness' on the part of the trade unions. If this is the case, holding dual leadership positions in the party and in the trade union would pose no difficulty.

If, on the other hand, one does accept the possibility of such fundamental disagreements between party and trade unions, the question is: which position would an individual holding two leadership posts promote in public debate, in the media and among the workers with whom he or she works?

Political parties, unlike trade unions, contest for state

power on behalf of their constituents. Trade unions, however, do not abstain from politics. The enormous contribution which the trade union movement has made to the collapse of apartheid bears testimony to this.

But the way unions become involved in politics is important. Trade unions from time to time choose to support political organisations whose policies would benefit organised workers. Such support will come after a process of internal discussion in the union movement, involving wide layers of workers. This is classical alliance politics, ie two separate and independent organisations, while retaining their separateness, co-operate on some specifically defined joint goals. Proper alliance politics is based on trade unions retaining their independence. Some of the principles of trade unions in an alliance are:

- Proper mandates from the members
- The maintenance of unity

among members

- The independence of union structures and decisions

If trade union leadership is at the same time the leadership of political parties, there cannot be a genuine alliance. *The real choice is therefore between real alliance politics, or dual leadership politics.*

On the role of the state

Cronin accuses me of believing that the role of the state in society as a whole is simply to rubber stamp agreements reached by trade unions in negotiations with employers. His accusation is highly misleading.

Of course, on those matters which trade unions negotiate and which become the subject of agreement, I do argue for the state to play an enabling role. That is, the state should pass into the law (and defend with its power) such gains made through trade union struggle.

But a trade union movement cannot tackle all the enormous challenges in

society - such as housing provision, basic educational facilities and public health care - which a new state would need to address. In all societies, the overall framework of economic development - such as taxation policies, monetary policies, the pattern and extent of public spending programmes, the role of the public sector - are a primary responsibility of the state.

A speech which seeks to promote new possibilities of trade union activity, and does not pretend to define the activities of a future state, can hardly be attacked on the grounds that it sees no role for the democratic state in transforming society!

No doubt there are significant differences between Cronin and myself on whether revolutionary opportunities exist in the current transition. I am pessimistic of those prospects materialising in circumstances where the economy remains a stable source of employment for millions of people (despite all its weaknesses) and the army remains absolutely unchallenged in its repressive capacity. I do not believe the working class will be in a position to decisively eliminate wage labour in the near future.

These underlying disagreements are not illuminated by forcing some Reaganite conception of the state onto my speech. My speech simply argued that it was desirable for bargaining institutions to be developed

further to deal with broad socio-economic issues as well as the content of laws governing labour relations. I suggested that these institutions should freely determine the functioning of the industrial court and the appointment of industrial court judges.

It is true that these ideas were not expressed in revolutionary terms. To do this would have utterly defeated the purpose of the speech. I hope even Cronin will accept there is no purpose served in addressing a convention of personnel managers on Marx/Lenin's conception of a bourgeois state. Nevertheless, I would have hoped that any party which champions the rights of the working class would strongly support the rights proposed in the speech, even if it thinks attempting to persuade employers on such matters is naive.

Unless the working class struggles vigorously for such bargaining rights now in the process of transition, the opportunity of securing real defences for the trade union movement will slip away. This is unnecessary and we will not easily allow it to happen. Trade union struggles for such forums have advanced too far at too high a price to simply shrink back and pin all hopes on achieving a revolutionary state formation, which in the near future will render unnecessary self-protection by organised workers.

Such bargaining rights are

important to the working class and they are achievable. Cronin feels this simple statement means I am "fixated with preparing workers for permanent opposition to an ANC government". It doesn't. It means simply that there is more to protecting the rights of the working class than just building the ANC or SACP. We have to build many other institutions besides those ones.

Critical among these civil institutions are broadly-based national trade unions. People engaged full-time in such tasks are not collaborators, they are independent trade unionists. Those who fail to distinguish between the two invariably wind up attacking trade unionists and undermining the strength of trade unionism despite their very revolutionary rhetoric.

Irrespective of the character of the state in a post-apartheid South Africa (whether it is of a capitalist or socialist orientation), society's interests will, in my opinion, best be served by having a trade union movement capable of articulating worker demands with which the government of the day may or may not agree. *This is not "preparation for permanent opposition"; it is preparation for permanent independence.*

Without such independence, workers are stripped of essential tools of democracy, and are driven towards the very same kind of empty democracy Cronin and all independent unionists are so concerned to avoid. ☆