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SAFTU: The tragedy and (hopefully not) the farce

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The labour movement has been unable to de-link itself from its archenemy: capital. As its structures bureaucratise, as its leaders become career unionists, as it opens investment companies and pays staff increasingly inequitable salaries, it increasingly mirrors the very thing it is fighting. If the South African Federation of Trade Unions is to meet its promise, it must be fundamentally different from the organisation it was born out of.

“History repeats itself first as tragedy, second as farce” –
Karl Marx

The tragedy of the disintegration of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) happened slowly. As tragedies go, COSATU’s has been far less dramatic than most; it has rather been a sad slow and painful unravelling of a once vibrant and powerful organisation over 20 odd years. The unravelling of an organisation that forgot that the whole is made up of the sum of its parts; that continuously made the mistake of allowing

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personalities to undermine democracy, ambition to undermine equity and bureaucracy to undermine equality and democratic participation.

COSATU's decay has had a significant impact on the South African working class. The impact has reverberated across the country in a myriad of ways and has been the result, both directly and indirectly, of COSATU's failure to effectively and democratically represent the working class. This has been the case partly because of its alliance with the ANC and partly because of its (and the trade union movement in general's) inherently defective organisational structure and patriarchal culture.

From the same ashes comes the rising of a new phoenix – a new hope for the South African working class – the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU). But the labour movement, broadly, has never been good at learning from its mistakes and this time around appears to be no exception. We can no longer make the mistake of thinking that changing the world is as simple as changing the colours of a flag. If we are to learn anything from history, it's that the flag IS the problem. If we truly want to change our society we have to change everything about it right down to the very structure upon which it is based. Flag poles need to be pulled down. Globally, the labour movement has not been able to de-link its organisational structure from that of its arch-enemy – capital. As a result, after time, as its structures bureaucratise, as its leaders become career unionists/stewards, as it opens investment companies and pays staff increasingly inequitable salaries, it increasingly mirrors the very thing it is fighting.

SAFTU is claiming to be different. It has picked up the banner of socialism and is asking us to follow it into a different, better, more equitable and just future. If we need anything right now, we need it is a new hope. But if SAFTU is to meet its promise it has to be fundamentally different to the organisation it was born out of. Is it our new hope or is it the inevitable farce that follows tragedy? In looking at the founding principles SAFTU has put forward, there

are a number of indicators that suggest it is going to repeat the mistakes of the old federation. Whilst the rhetoric harkens back to the great days of the Trade Union Movement the flagpole remains pretty much the same.

“We are building a fundamentally different type of workers’ organization – independent of political parties and employers but not apolitical – democratic, worker-controlled, militant, socialist-orientated, internationalist, pan-Africanist from a Marxist perspective and inspired by the principles of Marxism-Leninism.” – SAFTU

All genuine workers organisations started off independent of political parties but not apolitical. Any union worth their salt has started out being democratic and worker controlled. None of this is new, not in South Africa and not in the rest of the world. More importantly, no such union has managed to effectively challenge, let alone change capitalist society since the early part of the 20th Century and as we sit in the second decade of the 21st Century we find that most gains made by such unions have been successfully pushed back if not lost completely. Whilst SAFTU acknowledges a number of very important reasons why unions have failed, they have not asked the hardest question. Instead of asking what should a union do, the question SAFTU should be asking is: what have we been doing wrong? What is wrong with the nature of unions themselves?

“The new federation can show how different it is from other formations by showing that its principles are not just slogans, but guide our programmes in all that we do.” – SAFTU

Absolutely! This statement in particular sums up a great deal of what has been wrong with unions in the past and lies at the

core of the argument this article is making. COSATU and many other unions globally have failed dismally at implementing working class principles, on many levels, in many ways. Let's start with gender equity, shall we? In an important piece on the emergence of the new federation, Dr Asanda Benya asks: "How different will its gender politics be from Cosatu's? Will it resemble and reproduce Cosatu's gender stance, or reject it and take female workers seriously and appreciate the ways in which workplace struggles are gendered? After all, many of the same people who once led the unapologetically macho COSATU are now leading SAFTU."

This question lies at the very heart of the sentiment of practising what you preach. However, from representation at the launching congress to the same limited rhetoric and even less imaginative policy approach to the inclusion of women in the new federation, there is no indication that the new federation will prioritise women's issues or their rights. As things stand at present there is no reason at all to believe that the federation is any less "macho" than its predecessor. Rather, there is every reason to believe that the tradition of crying foul and claiming that you have been set up by an enemy cabal when either the president of the country or general secretary is accused of rape and sexual harassment will continue.

What exactly is the new federation going to do to ensure that women do not continue to be used as political tools in a battle of men over power? Will this be yet another federation controlled by working men that blames the victim in order to maintain control of its patriarchal power? If SAFTU is going to truly represent the working class, it has to recognise that work is gendered, that old style unionism is not; that if the union is going to ensure women and their issues are taken seriously this must be a primary focus of all policy. So far there is little evidence of this.

"Financial self-sufficiency and accountability and opposition, in word and deed, to business unionism, corruption, fraud and maladministration within its own ranks

A federation will not liberate the class, nor will its affiliates; only the working class can liberate itself and it will never be able to do that as long as there is an implicit belief in a Great Leader/s; as long as the union is seen as a legal service and as long as power and money are centralised. A truly participatory, democratic trade union would be one where the locals/branches of each affiliate control the membership dues collected, where they would use their dues to do work on the ground and put some aside for provincial and national work; where the workers have direct ownership of the means of trade union production (negotiation, representation, mobilisation) and where the extremely loosely used term, democracy, translates into individual worker agency and empowerment to ensure that the base, the majority, the working class, is where true power lies, and that it uses its power to change the world for the benefit of the many.

reinforce the current system and do not lay a solid foundation for a new society.

Yes “service” in COSATU unions over the past two decades has gone from bad to worse, but it could be argued that unions are not meant to service members. The idea of “service delivery” is in its very nature a neo-liberal word and attempting to fix what cannot be a capitalist endeavour by viewing a workers movement as an exchange of money for service is counter-intuitive. A real democratic worker controlled union is the WORKERS, nothing more nothing less.

Ideologically unions cannot be a business providing a service; they must be an organisation or movement of people that builds and develops a counter-power, counter-culture and a membership or cadre that struggle against the system by collectively negotiating better wages, by enabling and giving agency to its members to challenge and change their own realities. It must be about meeting members’ needs through organisation, education and learning, from participation, practice and direct democracy.

“Within the federation affiliates must have autonomy but not independence, but differences of opinion must be tolerated”.

Rightly, SAFTU identifies democracy as a key problem that needs to be addressed but it does so within the same hierarchical structure as the system it is fighting and the federation it left. Once again doing things differently and implementing the principles it espouses throw up a number of contradictions that SAFTU has not addressed. SAFTU has not identified how the power relations in a neo-colonial, patriarchal, capitalist system are replicated by their own structures. There have been way too many union congresses where “representatives” have dropped their mandates after conversation with “leadership” and voted against democratic decisions taken at the base.

*and in a capitalist society which is inherently corrupt” –
SAFTU*

During the 1990s there were huge debates in COSATU and its affiliates around the appropriateness of union investment companies. To the right there were strong arguments for using workers money to support unions and union principles. From the left there was strong resistance to what was seen as endorsing, if not becoming part of, the capitalist system.

Very few unions have effectively used money from these ‘investments’ to the benefit of the working class. SAFTU’s statement regarding the inherent corruption of capitalism sounds great but it is important to note that the call for channeling retirement funds into productive investment is not the same as the new federation using its own or its affiliate’s investment funds to lead productive investment. It is a demand for capital to do so.

What is unclear is what SAFTU’s position on union investment companies is. Is the federation and its affiliates planning on actually taking the money from its investment companies and using it to set up a housing cooperative or building societies like the unions of old? Or will these investment companies’ money continue to be used to buy more and bigger buildings and offices for the unions themselves?

In the launching congress a clause on union official’s salaries was included in SAFTU’s constitution saying that the leadership will not earn more than the average skilled worker. There has already been internal debate about what exactly the wage for an average skilled worker is. This lack of clarity is being used to argue that official salaries should not be set by the constitution and the broader congress, rather it should be an internal policy issue to be decided on by the leadership, including the very leadership that will earn these salaries.

Putting the argument against paying officials at all aside for a moment, the warning signs of impending bureaucratisation and

elitism are already going off. Not only within SAFTU but within its affiliates, this question must be asked and must be addressed – if your principles are anti-capitalist and socialist, surely your structures should reflect these principles. All union workers should be paid the same.

By the same token, there is already a call to work towards negotiating for paid shop stewards. This development within the trade union movement has had one of the biggest negative impacts on the unity and solidarity of workers. It has been used by management as a highly effective tool to co-opt union shop stewards and to divide the shop floor. It has played a significant role in one of the main problems SAFTU has identified as one that needs to be corrected: the distance created between the union/officials and workers. A union is not a business and can never be driven by motives of personal or organisational gain; gain must always be for the union members and not an elite few. Unions of the past, unions that have been of and for its members, have done so due to the principled dedication of their ordinary membership and elected representatives without pay.

Overall, in relation to the issues of union finances and financial policies, despite all the noise to the contrary, for SAFTU it's business as usual.

“We shall convene a bargaining conference to fight the attempts by the Free Market Foundation and employers to liquidate collective and centralized bargaining, and shall mobilize mass action to stop this attempt.” – SAFTU

A key function/business of unions is bargaining better wages and working conditions for its members. The greatest unions have been the ones where mass mobilisation of members around bread and butter issues have succeeded in making significant shifts in this regard. The real shifts, however, tend to be made when the general

membership is actively involved through mobilisation, protest and strike.

Whilst centralised collective bargaining makes the bargaining process easier for unions and sets industry minimums, the notion of centralisation is ultimately counter-intuitive to a participatory, worker-led organisation. It is my contention that centralised collective bargaining centralises not only the negotiation process but the participatory, learning process of bargaining and workplace organisation; it also removes the power of workers to raise their voices collectively within a physically defined workplace, build workplace solidarity and share learnings from the process. Many union organisers and shop stewards of the past cut their teeth in shop floor bargaining processes. Centralisation of bargaining centralises power and decision-making and, whilst unintentional, it removes agency from workers on the shop floor.

The new federation needs to re-look its overall strategy in terms of how it takes capital on. It needs to assess where and when the greatest gains are made for the working class. From experience over the last 20 years, this is not at the negotiating table, not in the bargaining councils and not in NEDLAC. Workers and the working class have had to re-learn the lesson apartheid taught us: that real gains are made in the streets, in collective action not compromised negotiation.

“We shall discuss with all unions about how best to deliver quality service – working toward the development of a service charter.”

As with the practice of working within the financial systems of the capitalist class, the appropriation of business terms and capitalist language needs to be strongly guarded against. Language and words play a significant role in the culture of societies and organisations. Using words that reinforce a system and culture that you are fighting, that reinforce an unequal society with unequal roles,