

COSATU federation leader expresses fear of social explosion in South Africa

Eric Graham
2 October 2012

In the midst of an escalating wave of wildcat strike action by workers in the platinum, gold, coal and chrome mining sectors, and following the mass murder of 34 striking miners at Lonmin's Marikana platinum mine, South Africa's biggest trade union federation, COSATU, convened its 11th national congress at Gallagher Estate in Gauteng province.

Zwelinzima Vavi, COSATU's secretary general, delivered a hard-hitting address to the delegates attending the congress, noting that "a multiple crisis is emerging in society, which, if not addressed, has the potential to result in an organizational implosion, and social explosion."

According to the report delivered by Vavi, the three key elements of this crisis are:

Firstly, "[a]n emerging organizational crisis, in which the ANC... is increasingly wracked by factionalism, patronage and corruption, and is unable to reassert the mission and strategic vision of the organization."

Secondly, "[a] crisis in the state, in which years of neglect, fiscal cutbacks and contracting out of state responsibilities ... combined with the endemic corruption and a failure of political and bureaucratic leadership... render elements of the state apparatus increasingly ineffective, or even dysfunctional."

He added that "[t]his institutional crisis in parts of the state is directly related to the *crisis of non-delivery* (emphasis in original) which confronts many working class communities."

Thirdly, the report pointed to "[a] crisis of *poverty, inequality and unemployment* [emphasis in original] which is reproduced by the structural features of our economy."

Vavi's report continued by stating that this threefold crisis is leading to "[a]n emerging crisis of *political legitimacy and disillusionment*" (emphasis in original),

which "includes suggestions that growing numbers of the electorate don't intend to vote in 2014..."

In the report Vavi posed the question, "Who have been the main beneficiaries of our revolution in the first 18 years?"

He answered it: "This report shows that economically, the main beneficiaries have been capital, and particularly white capital, and a small emerging elite," further noting that "while profits rise, workers are receiving a declining share of GDP... in real terms the income and living standards of many workers and their families have not improved."

The report warned that "[o]rdinary people will rightly question why, having repeatedly been given an overwhelming mandate to lead transformation of society, our movement has continued to advance policies which in effect entrench the structures of power and privilege in society, with modification aimed at incorporating a new elite; while the lives of poor communities and working people continued to be characterized by poverty, disease, ignorance and unemployment" and then, most significantly "[i]f their movement continues to fail them they will be forced to look for an alternative."

Vavi's report also noted that there are worrying perceptions of "growing corruption among union leaders, including the sense that union leaders are being co-opted, and selling them [the workers] out." He mentioned that only six percent of affiliate members knew who their union general secretary or president was.

According to the report, Jacob Zuma's replacing of Thabo Mbeki as president, which, according to Vavi "represented a revolt from below, and assertion of policies biased to the working class" had not been realized. After the elections which installed Zuma in

the presidency in 2009, there was a “sense that the Alliance” between the African National Congress, COSATU and the South African Communist Party “was being used as an election machine.”

Vavi’s report drew fire, particularly from the affiliates which had recently faced the biggest crises in the past year, such as the National Union of Mineworkers and the South African Democratic Teachers Union. Frans Baleni, the general secretary of the NUM, urged COSATU to be “more respectful” to the ANC and not to try to dictate to it. SADTU objected to the word “crisis” being used throughout the document and proposed that it be replaced by “challenge”.

“You can’t say the ANC is in crisis because things don’t go your way” the affiliate stated.

Gwede Mantashe, the ANC’s secretary general, also weighed in, saying that the report was “trying to drive a wedge between the ANC and its members.”

Mantashe said that the ANC was under attack from disillusioned members and COSATU often aligned itself with the views of these members. According to Mantashe, COSATU wanted to join the “deafening noise, aligning with other forces on a tactical basis” and still be the ANC’s ally on a strategic basis. COSATU should desist from trying to “delegitimise” the state by distorting facts.

The SACP and ANC demanded that any criticism of their respective organizations be removed from the document.

Vavi, however, is not attacking the ANC but delivering an allies’ warning to the ANC government. His message is that if the ANC is to remain in power, and if a revolution is to be avoided, then the ANC should modify its course and be seen to be doing something to remedy its worst excesses and to implement minimal measures directed at alleviating the suffering of the working class.

The ANC’s reaction shows that his warning falls on deaf ears.

Vavi made scant mention of COSATU’s complicity in creating this crisis over the past 18 years. He speaks of the alliance becoming an electoral vehicle for the ANC, but COSATU’s 2015 Plan, adopted in 2003, in fact called for “a campaign to ensure that the working class swells the ranks of the ANC (emphasis in original) as part of the contestation for the soul of the

movement and to ‘jealously defend the progressive and working class bias of the ANC’ by calling on its members... to join the ANC en masse”.

COSATU has acted as the chief mechanism to prevent the working class from breaking with the ANC. This is now being torn apart by the wave of protests that followed on from the mass murder at Marikana.

During the congress, a declaration regarding the killings at Marikana was drafted. For the ANC, Gwede Mantashe objected to the wording of the statement saying that COSATU should “put into context the counter-revolutionary attack on the NUM as the soft underbelly of the federation and by extension [the] soft underbelly of the alliance.”

He continued “the threat of counter-revolution [was] creating no-go areas for progressive forces,” and instead there were now “liberated zones for counter-revolution.”

Frans Baleni, the NUM secretary-general who backed the police murder of strikers to the hilt, enthusiastically endorsed the “clean up” the declaration and particularly to “massage the wording around the police.”

The congress indicated strong support for a second term for Zuma, expressed in rapturous applause and the frequent singing of pro-Zuma songs when he made his entrance and delivered his address. Irvin Jim of NUMSA and Thobile Ntola of SADTU, in the past numbered among Zuma’s critics, tried to have their support for him publicly noted.

The sickening spectacle prompted Carol Paton, writing in *Business Day*, to note that “The wave of support for Zuma was by far the crowning contradiction of the week: a month after his government killed 34 mine workers at Marikana, Cosatu delegates were singing the name of president with the highest acclaim.”



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact