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Mopeli, Tawana

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Abstract:
A Workers' Association that Transitioned from a Fighting to an Infighting and Ultimately a Splintering Union: The case of SATAWU

By

Student Name: Tawana Mopeli
Student Number: 1522806

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Supervisor: Professor Devan Pillay

Abstract

This study explores two historical moments that contributed to the internal crisis in SATAWU (South African Transport and Allied Workers Union). The first moment concerns the merger between the former SATAWU and Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) in May 2000. The outcomes of the amalgamation influenced the formation of two splinter unions which were the Transport and General Workers Union of South Africa (TGWUSA) between 2001 and 2002 and the new South African Railway and Harbour Workers Union (SARHWU) in 2002. Union leaders, members and staff assumed that all internal challenges had subsided after the first wave of crisis. This assumption was negated by events following the 3rd National Congress (NC) in 2011. The second moment has to do with hardened intra and inter-factional struggles which contributed to the formation of three breakaway unions between 2012 and 2015. The splinter unions include the establishment of National Transport Movement (NTM) in 2012, Democratised Transport Logistics and Allied Workers Union (DETAWU) and the Revolutionary Transport Union of South Africa (RETUSA) in 2015. The ruptures had dire ramifications on membership density, financial stability and employee securities. The 2018 SATAWU 4th National Congress report highlighted that approximately 148542 (from 250000 to 101458) members were lost during the latter period of the union's crisis. These turning points reflect that within its stages of development, the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) was unable to manage conflict or collectively adapt to the change process.

The formation of TGWUSA and new SARHWU occurred at a time when African capitalism was expanding in society including the labour movement. The enactment of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy in 1996, created an era of great prosperity and blossoming of an African middle-class through Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), affirmative action, occupation of strategic state positions and growing use of union funds in investment arms for business ventures. The transition to political unionism and adoption of entrepreneurial trade union leadership/managerial styles permitted the labour movement to become a breeding ground for businessmen, union lords and an African middle-class. The newly acquired wealth and prestige were interrupted by the global economic meltdown in 2008/9. General socio-economic shocks and the desire for instant opulence created a race to the top at the same rate as its antithetical relation to the bottom. It was at this stage in development that newly established conditions of the African elite were threatened. Consequently, the ANC-led government and its constellation were subjected to a wave of sequential ruptures. It is from this perspective that the formation of NTM, DETAWU and RETUSA represent a broader crisis in the Tripartite Alliance and South Africa's political economy.

The history of SATAWU's internal crisis illustrates that multiple convergences and divergences led to the splintering of the union. Separate from issues of political ideology, we realise that the fight for resources and upward mobility contributed to the union's negative turning point. The previous administration(s) from 2000 to 2017 relied on kangaroo courts and social distance between union leaders, staff and members to manage factions, avert accountability and to eradicate detractors. The highlighted factors stifled open engagements, minimised direct participation in union activities and outlawed democratic contestations for leadership positions. The factional hegemony was sustained through the phasing out of institutional memory, occupation of strategic union organs, limiting access to information, monopolising communication and eroding workers education for service provider training and development programmes. Intra-factional struggles have proven to reorganise and challenge an existing status quos.

Generally, the distribution of illegitimate power weakens internal democracy and entrenches oligarchic practices. The root cause of oligarchy is the lack of accountability, the need to preserve authority and violation of constituted rules. Motivated by the drive for upward mobility, a culture of monopolisation of resources, means of communication, knowledge and skills was employed to manage and safeguard personal interests within SATAWU. The emergence of oligarchy in SATAWU's formal democratic structure shows that it was a phenomenon caused by the undemocratic actions of a dominant minority. It is only through the proper application of union statutes, direct participatory democracy and worker control that oligarchy can be counteracted. Oligarchy is not inevitable and/or an automatic process but exists as a consequence of skewed/negated democratic processes.

Apart from SATAWU's history of internal crisis, South Africa's trade union landscape is generally in a state of flux. A multiplicity of factors such as the history of in-fighting, global economic instabilities and the inability for capitalism to reform itself played a critical role in dividing and weakening the labour movement. Traditional and independent trade unions have found it to be increasingly difficult to adapt to variations in the capitalist mode of production. The future of work including the direction and character of the labour movement has thus become a muddy terrain. Taken from a positive point of view, these negative conditions open new opportunities for trade union reconstruction, adaptability and modernisation. The work of van der Walt (2014) for example, proposes anarcho and revolutionary syndicalism as an alternative form of workplace organisation. By tracing the genesis and history of internal crisis in line with union purpose, organisation and capacities, adequate change strategies needed for repositioning, reorganising and revitalising trade unions like SATAWU can be formulated and implemented accordingly.

Importantly, this study seeks to answer whether or not a crisis-ridden trade union like SATAWU can be revitalised. In attempting to answer this question, it is important to understand that the starting point for revitalisation demands an open discussion and/or reflection on SATAWU's history of internal crisis. This includes a critical assessment of the merger between the former SATAWU and TGWU. Furthermore, exploring the factors and conditions which not only replicated historical problems but created new conditions of struggle/challenges. When locating the crisis, both internal and external conditions must be taken into consideration. The differences, commonality of factors, the evolution of historical moments and lessons from the crisis must be drawn before the implementation of remedial prescriptions. The survival of SATAWU will at the end of the day be determined by the union's ability to diagnose, adapt, influence and implement change strategies. Direct participatory democracy is an essential component for achieving problems-solving solutions necessary for realising meaningful change. All other issues will flow from the union's commitment to implement all corrective measures effectively and efficiently.