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## HISTORY WORKSHOP

THE COSATU PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY TRADITION AND WORKER EXPECTATIONS FROM THE NEW PARLIAMENT: ARE THEY RECONCILABLE?

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# The COSATU Participatory Democracy Tradition and Worker Expectations from the New Parliament: Are They Reconcilable?

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## Introduction

This paper focuses on COSATU workers' perceptions of trade union and parliamentary democracy in a survey conducted during the month preceding the election. It provides insight into their understanding and practice of a participatory democratic tradition that was established by some COSATU unions in the 1970s. It furthermore shows that workers have transferred their understanding of trade union democracy directly to their expectations of parliamentary democracy. This has important implications for the relationship between COSATU and the new government.

But what is trade union democracy and how did the workers arrive at their understanding of union democracy? In order to provide a framework for answering these questions the paper commences with an exposition of the historical development of trade union democracy in the country that first gave birth to trade unionism, Great Britain. The reasons why the British experience is chosen are, firstly, because many of the unions in COSATU modelled their democracy on that existent in Britain at the time of their emergence in the early 1970s; secondly, the exposition helps to clarify concepts that are central to this paper namely direct democracy, oligarchy, participative democracy and shopfloor or workplace democracy.

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* I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Geoff Wood to this paper. Part 3 is based on work he has done in the joint research project from which this paper emanates.

## 1. A Democratic Tradition

### 1.1 Historical Development of Trade Union Democracy

Sidney and Beatrice Webb examined the development of trade union democracy in British trade unions from their origins up to the early twentieth century. They did so in their book, *Industrial Democracy*, which was published in 1897. They called the first stage of trade union democracy to emerge 'primitive democracy'. It took place in the local trade clubs of the eighteenth century and was a form of direct participatory democracy. The members strove to conduct all the business at the general meetings and were imbued with the principle of 'what concerns all should be decided by all' (Webb, 1911:8). The president was often only chosen for a particular meeting and the next most important officers were usually chosen by rotation. The early 'trade clubs' were thus organisations in which all members participated without an established hierarchy of officials.

However, when the local unions started federating into national unions between 1824 and 1840 it was no longer possible for the unions to practice direct democracy. On account of their regional dispersion it became necessary for the national unions to elect full-time secretaries. The unions however still tried to continue vesting supreme authority in the members by means of a referndum which granted any section of the union the right 'to insist on its proposals being submitted to the vote of the whole electorate'. (Webb, 1911:21)

The referendum however had the opposite effect of what was intended: instead of the members retaining a real say in the affairs of the union, control was centralised and enabled the development of oligarchic rule by the officials and executive. This happened because

> the right of putting questions to the vote came practically to be confined to the executive... Any change which the executive desired could be stated in the most plausible terms and supported by convincing arguements, which almost invariably secured its adoption by a large majority... (Webb,1911:26)

Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century, after about a century of organisational experience, oligarchy, that is, domination by a few officials, was prevalent in the British trade union movement. This, the Webbs maintained, was because of the attempt to retain direct participatory democracy in national organisations (Webb, 1911:36).

The more advanced trade unions had however become aware of the existence and causes of oligarchy. Their constitutions

underwent a 'silent revolution' after 1889 to emerge with a representative form of democracy. In the opinion of the Webbs this was successful in solving

> the fundamental problem of democracy, the combination of administrative efficiency and popular control (Webb, 1911:38).

The central feature of the system of representative democracy was the election of an assembly of representatives as the supreme body in the union. It also appointed an executive committee which governed the union between conferences of the assemblies (Webb, 1911:38-9,43-4).

In order to obtain a balance between workers' aspirations and efficient administration, the unions made provision for representation of both workers and officials on their assemblies and executive committees. The executive committee of one of the unions, the Cotton Operatives, for instance, consisted of three office bearers as well as thirteen additional members, seven of whom had to be working spinners while the remaining six were permanent officials (Webb, 1911:39). This had the effect of restoring some popular control in the unions. Although the officials still tended to dominate at the assembly conferences the worker representatives frequently intervened 'with effect' in the procedures (Webb, 1911:44).

This form of worker participation however only took place at the level of the supreme representative assembly, not the shopfloor. It not only limited the potential for trade union democracy through rank and file participation, but also opened the way for oligarchic tendencies to re-assert themselves in the unions.

The way these oligarchic tendencies were overcome in British trade unions was through the emergence of a strong shop stewards movement. Shop stewards initially had the task of protecting their craft from job dilution, but their role was widened to workplace negotiation at the end of the nineteenth century (Clegg, 1979:21).

After briefly emerging during the First World War, shop stewards came to the fore in industrial relations in Britain in the 1960s as they shifted the emphasis of negotiation to workplace bargaining. The drive was provided by the rise in rank-and-file strength and militancy (Lane, 1974:162). In the upsurge of workplace bargaining the shop stewards' role was no longer one of protecting a craft, but negotiating directly with management on the shopfloor over wages and a wide range of working conditions. This included health and safety, dismissal and other disciplinary actions, as well as negotiating about the introduction of new machinery and jobs (Clegg, 1979:24).

The upsurge in autonomous workplace bargaining under the leadership of shop stewards made its impact felt on trade union organisation as well. The most significant change was the incorporation of shop stewards into the union structures. By impelling themselves onto the various bodies of the unions, shop stewards did much to restore democratic practices in the unions once again. Decision-making in the unions shifted towards the shopfloor as pressure could be brought to bear from the shop stewards who had autonomous power bases in the workplace (Clegg, 1979:220).

Although much more could be added about the historical and contemporary struggle to establish and maintain democracy in trade unions, enough has been said to provide some conclusions based on the British experience. (1) The first is that efforts to maintain **direct** participatory democracy on the part of large national unions resulted in oligarchy. The second is that the introduction of **representative** democracy in the unions' assemblies and executives did a great deal to restore democracy to the unions. The third is that the emergence of a strong shop stewards movement in the 1960s introduced **participatory shopfloor** democracy to the unions.

### 1.2 Origins of Participatory Democracy in COSATU

The origins of participatory democracy in COSATU can be traced to the unions that emerged in South Africa at the time of the Durban strikes in 1973. Almost from the outset these unions were committed to the creation of participatory shopfloor democracy in their structures and as part of their practice.

The independent unions emerging in the 1970s that concentrated on participatory workplace organisation were the Natal and Transvaal unions belonging to the Trade Union Advisory and Co-ordinating Council (TUACC) and the Western Province General Workers' Union in Cape Town (subsequently it became the General Workers' Union, GWU). The TUACC unions merged with other independent unions in 1979 to form the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). In 1985 FOSATU, the GWU, and many other unions committed to non-racialism, founded the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

A key influence in these unions were intellectuals based at the liberal universities of Natal, Witwatersrand and Cape Town. They were moved by the upsurge of the shop steward movement in the British trade union movement in the 1960s as well as the strong surge for participatory democracy that

1. See Maree, 1986:33-53, for more details.

followed in the wake of the 1968 student and workers' revolts in France and other European countries.

The workers, for their part, threw themselves with zest into the task of building factory committees consisting of worker representatives. In due time these committees became shop steward committees comprising elected shop stewards. (2) In practice the strategy of workplace organisation was implemented in different ways by distinct union groupings. The TUACC unions in Natal commenced with mass recruitment as workers poured into the unions after the Durban strikes. When the weakness of this organisational strategy dawned on the organisers during 1974 to 1975 the unions switched to in-depth workplace organisation. Shop stewards were given the key tasks of recruiting and organising workers, collecting subscriptions, canvassing worker positions on issues and taking them up with management. To do so, they had to meet regularly, usually weekly, as committees where they also received training.

By contrast the MAWU branch of TUACC in Johannesburg engaged in intensive workplace organisation right from the outset. At Heinemann Electric, the union's best organised factory, as many as three weekly meetings were being held during the intensive struggle for recognition by the union. The tradition continued after the union lost the Heinemann dispute: shop stewards' meetings of all the factories being organised were held weekly and more frequently when there was a dispute taking place.

The WPGWU also laid an emphasis on workplace organisation although they organised works committees rather than shop stewards committees. In effect there was no difference as the works committees consisted of elected worker representatives. From the outset regular weekly meetings were held with works committees from organised plants. In addition monthly general meetings with the rank and file members from each enterprise were also held. It gradually developed a principle that only worker representatives and not officials should negotiate with management. This was in order to ensure the representativeness and accountability of the negotiators.

The above detailed account shows that the foundations of workplace participatory democracy were firmly laid in independent unions that emerged during the 1970s and subsequently became affiliates in COSATU. It was however not only participatory democracy, but also representative democracy that developed in the unions over this period. Already in the late 1970s they were struggling to ensure that the democracy was truly representative. To illustrate

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2. For a union by union account of how this was achieved in the 1970s, see Maree, 1986.

how the unions tried to ensure the representativeness of their democratic structures, an example from TUACC in Natal is presented.

### 1.3 Striving to Implement Representative Democracy in TUACC

The commitment of the intellectuals in the movement to democracy led them to construct TUACC in such a manner that workers' control was formally built into the organisation. TUACC consisted of a Council and Secretariat: the Council was composed of the full Branch Executive Committees (BECs) of the unions affiliated to it. The Secretariat consisted of two representatives nominated by each affiliated union, only one of which could be a paid official of the union. Furthermore, only trade union representatives had voting rights on the Council and Secretariat.(3) The principle of worker representative majorities was thus built into both the TUACC Council and Secretariat.

Even though a democratic structure with worker majorities had been created, a basic problem was to ensure the representativeness of the union representatives on TUACC. Already at the first meeting of the TUACC Secretariat in June 1975 concern was expressed about the danger that members of the Secretariat may not represent the interests of their constituents at the meetings. They were therefore encouraged to report back to their BECs and union or local staff meetings. Furthermore they were also reminded that:

> since they did not come as individuals they were only entitled to put forward the arguments of their union, not their own point of view.(4)

This however turned out to be a vain hope. Four years later in 1979 the regional secretary again noted that:

> the functioning of the Secretariat remains a matter of concern. There is a need for all members of the Secretariat to improve the extent to which they express the position of those they represent rather than simply their own viewpoint.(5)

By that stage one of the unions, the Metal and Allied Workers' Union (MAWU), had taken steps to overcome the problem. The MAWU BEC submitted specific resolutions to the Secretariat rather than leaving it up to the MAWU representatives to put forward the union's position. It is

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3. TUACC Constitution, Clauses 5 and 6.
4. Minutes, TUACC Secretariat meeting, 23 June 1975.
5. J.Mawbey, Secretary's Report to the Natal Regional Council, 2 March 1979.

thus clear that the form of democracy being established in the unions was both participatory and representative.

### 1.4 Democratic Ethic in Unions

In trying to answer the question where COSATU workers surveyed in 1994 acquired their understanding of trade union democracy, the above exposition has made it clear that the foundations of their understanding were laid during the 1970s. But it was not only a set of democratic practices and structures that were entrenched, a democratic ethic was also implanted in the union members during the 1970s. What the unions were trying to achieve in the 1970s and what lay behind the thinking of the intellectuals was well expressed by Alec Erwin in 1979. He became secretary of TUACC in 1977 and, subsequently, the first general secretary of FOSATU.

> It seems to me there are, broadly speaking, two conceptions of democracy. One I would style a radical-liberal conception which is that everyone must have his say and be allowed to vote. And within those people someone must be a leader. I think that kind of democracy is actually open to disguised power manipulation and control because every man speaking will not change basic structures or institutions in society. We'd say you must have resilient structures that can hold people accountable in a real sense.
>
> So the alternate conception of democracy is a much more structured view: that people must be able to control what is possible to control. We must establish more definite structures of accountability. So what we were trying to build in TUACC, and are presently trying to achieve in FOSATU, is that the democratic structure must be through a process of the factory controlling the shop steward because that man the worker sees every day in the plant, his access to him is far greater. Then the shop steward sits on the BEC and the report back system is structured and definite. If I could contrast this, say, to a BEC that's elected at an AGM. There is no clear structure of systematic accountability there. So we've been trying in TUACC to build that structure up from shop steward to BEC to TUACC.
>
> Now that is a very much slower process because structures in themselves never create democracy. Only aware leadership and membership create democracy. So once having built shop stewards you then have to make them effective shop stewards. If they are effective their membership is going to be more informed, conscious and interested in knowing what they are doing. And likewise good shop stewards will make a good

> BEC, and a good BEC a good National Executive Committee.(6)

Erwin's evaluation of the extent to which intellectuals in TUACC had succeeded in creating democratic trade unions by 1979 flowed from the form of democracy they were pursuing.

> Now it does mean that the conceivers of democratic structures, the intellectual leadership, will be more dominant in the initial period. While there is no doubt that a few of us have been very important and dominant and we pushed and buldozed to some extent, I think that the practices and lines we've established are democratic and resilient. I think we built up BEC executives and shop stewards who can decide for themselves, who are effective in their own plants. The more successful they are the more that leadership will become powerful and effective. Now working on that conception of democracy it will take more time.
>
> I would say in TUACC whilst we [the intellectuals -JM] might be powerful there's no possibility that we could massively abuse the power structures. It's just because certain ethics have been established which cannot be broken at this point no matter how dominant the intellectual might be. We have more resilient checks against our power than whatever had been achieved by the liberal-democratic conception of democracy. I don't deny that we might have a lot of power and influence, but equally it's nonsense to say that workers must just democratically rise up.
>
> To my mind the one thing that the TUACC experience did create is its conception that workers' control as an ethic is crucial and that the BEC is more important than the organiser. I do believe we've got that. We haven't as yet got a capacity for the BEC to effectively dominate the organiser, but the ethic that it should do is firmly implanted and not challengeable. So I think an organiser can't step too far outside that. If he does he's gone.(7)

The account thus far has outlined the historical development of trade union democracy in Britain and the way in which it was practiced in South Africa by the independent unions that emerged during the 1970s and subsequently became affiliates of COSATU. In the next section the rapid growth during the 1980s of the independent unions, particularly COSATU, is presented. The organisational consequences for COSATU of this rapid growth are then examined.

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6. Interview: Erwin, 1979.
7. Ibid.

## 2. Union Growth in 1980s and its Consequences

### 2.1 Rapid Growth in the 1980s

After the state 'legitimised' African trade unions in 1979 by granting them official recognition, the independent unions grew explosively in the 1980s. The trend continued albeit at a decelerating rate into the 1990s. Total trade union membership from 1979 to 1991 increased almost fourfold from 700 000 to 2,7 million with trade union density (the proportion of the labour force unionised) in the non-agricultural sector rising from 15% to 53% (Macun, 1993:49).

More specifically, the membership of the independent (mainly African) unions shot up in the first four years after 1979 from 70 000 to 300 000. It was particularly with regard to formal recognition that the unions made most headway. Whereas there were only 5 recognition agreements at the end of 1979 there were no less than 406 by the end of 1983. FOSATU accounted for 70% of the agreements (Maree, 1985:297).

COSATU also made very rapid headway: at the time of its formation in November 1985 it had 462 000 members. By the end of 1991 its membership had increased almost threefold to 1,26 million. Three quarters of its membership in 1991 were concentrated in the manufacturing and mining industries. It was in the manufacturing sector that COSATU's membership started levelling off in the 1990s. On the other hand the public sector unions in COSATU started growing rapidly in the 1990s (Macun, 1993:49-50).

The major reasons for the rapid growth of the independent unions in the 1980s appear to be firstly because of the changed political climate brought about by the 'legalisation' of African trade unions by the state. Secondly, sound workplace organisation in the form of shop steward structures combined with good local and national leadership has been identified as a key factor in the unions' growth. Finally, economic conditions, especially inflation, acted as a spurt to workers to join unions in order to protect their real wages (Macun, 1993:51-52).

### 2.2 Organisational Consequences of Rapid Growth

The rapid growth of unions in the 1980s meant that they grew large - in some cases extremely large - with their organisation extending to the national level. Negotiations became more centralised and the issues being dealt with commensurately more complex. The structures of the unions became more complex with Regional and National Executive

Committees (RECs and NECs) coming on top of Branch Executive Committees (BECs).

The organisational structure of COSATU also became more complex. As union densities increased local shop stewards councils emerged in different localities with shop stewards from all the unions operating in the localities required to attend the meetings.

As the unions and COSATU grew in strength they exercised their political and strategic muscles by forcing their way onto statutory institutions such as the National Manpower Commission and National Training Board. They also took the initiative in creating forums on which they could influence economic and industrial policy. The National Economic Forum was the most significant forum which was only established after a hard struggle by organised labour.

The implications of all these for trade union democracy was that the rank and file members as well as their shop stewards became increasingly remote from the central issues which the unions were contesting in the 1990s. The issues being dealt with also became so complex that it was beyond the capacity of shop stewards to grasp and debate these issues. As a result agendas of local shop stewards councils meetings became dominted by issues that came from 'head office'. The complexity of the issues meant that, far from generating vibrant debates and giving mandates for national action, local meetings often turned into long briefing sessions (Marie, 1992:22). Besides the lack of expertise of shop stewards, the problem also lay in the COSATU practice of 'discussing every issue in every structure'. Ironically the practice had the opposite effect of the intended worker control. Instead, it created 'the conditions for the development of a bureaucracy' (Marie, 1992:25). Consequently, attendance at local meetings also declined. In 1992 approximately 100 out of a possible 500 shop stewards turned up at COSATU's Durban local whereas in the Johannesburg local only about 100 of the potential 1000 shop stewards attended regularly (Keet, 1992:35).

The hierarchical growth of COSATU unions also put strains on union representatives within the unions. Effective shop stewards who made it onto their union's NECs were also on their RECs and BECs. For a shop steward to be effective 'it is advantageous to attend the whole sequence of meetings upwards', but for a shop steward to be diligent could require 'attending after-work meetings every night of the week, and over the weekend' (Keet, 1992:32).

These structural problems within COSATU and its affiliates implied that worker control could no longer be practiced effectively in the 1990s. An even more basic problem that has emerged was the breakdown in communication within the

unions, both from the bottom-up as well as from the top-down. The implication of this was that the rank and file members of the unions were no longer aware of what their leaders did at national level.

The research conducted in this survey cast light on these issues. In particular it tested to what extent union democracy was still in operation at the workplace level. This is discussed in the next section.

## 3. Union Democracy at Workplace Level

### 3.1 Union Membership

Place Fig.1 about here

Figure 1 provides a visual presentation of the date when workers in the survey first joined a trade union. Very few joined the unions during the height of state repression in the 1960s. The numbers increased as black unions re-emerged in the 1970s and struggled for survival. But as Figure 1 demonstrates, the overwhelming majority of respondents in our survey joined a union for the first time during the 1980s and in 1990. Thereafter the rate of joining tapered off again in the 1990s. This corresponds with the rapid growth of black trade unions during the 1980s in the wake of the 1979 Wiehahn reforms in labour relations which heralded state recognition of African trade unions for the first time in the country's history. Most of the respondents had therefore been members of a trade for between four to fourteen years with the median falling in 1985. On average most members in our sample therefore had about nine years Whereas the membership of the independent unions was only 70 000 at the end of
trade union experience.

A large proportion of the sample was drawn from members of the ex-FOSATU unions, and other unions that placed an emphasis on participative shopfloor democracy (the so-called workerist unions), the most important exceptions being ex-SAAWU and SAMWU. SAAWU disbanded when COSATU was established, its membership being divided between umbrella industrial unions, often centred around former FOSATU affiliates. Although there have been some recorded instances of tensions between former FOSATU and SAAWU members (e.g. the 1990 Mercedes-Benz dispute), this process of absorbtion was generally successful.

Unfortunately, this survey did not cover many of the most recently-unionized workers, those in the public sector,

especially in the former homelands. Public sector workers enter the union movement with a rather different body of previous experience to other categories of worker. Furthermore, public sector workers are less likely to have had any direct previous experience of the limits and possibilities of union organization. It is as yet uncertain as to what impact these new unionists will have on established union democratic practices.

Traditionally, the bulk of members in COSATU has been in the manufacturing and mining sectors. It is also unfortunate that mineworkers (NUM) is very under-represented in the sample. Given the history of NUM: it was founded under the auspices of the Africanist Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) in 1982 and joined COSATU in 1985, it would have been interesting to observe more closely whether it manifested any distinct democratic features.

### 3.2 Formal Shopsteward Structures

Place Fig.2 about here

Almost all respondents (99 %) reported that they had functional shopsteward structures at their workplace (fig 2). This demonstrates that COSATU has successfully maintained the tradition of shopfloor organization. It should be noted that such organization promotes multi-layered leadership, which is of particular importance at a time when the upper echelons of the union movement are being siphoned off into parliament and other state structures. As was apparent from the state banning of 24 key trade union activists in November 1976, the sudden removal of key leadership may severely damage union organization. Shopfloor organization also forms an important grassroots counterbalance to industry wide deals.

### 3.3 Democratic Practices on the Shopfloor

Place Fig.3 about here

Eighty four percent of shopstewards were elected, although 12% were appointed by the union (fig. 3). This demonstrates a high level of representative democracy being practiced on the shopfloor in that shop stewards are mostly elected. The small proportion that are appointed by the unions could reflect undemocratic practices or early stages of factory organization when unions often appoint shop stewards initially to assist in recruitment drives and so on.

Place Fig.4 about here

Fifty eight percent of respondents had elected their shopstewards within the preceding twelve months (fig.4). However, 12% had only done so more than two years previously, whilst 8% had never done so. Whilst it seems that a democratic tradition in shopfloor structures has persisted, there is thus a definite component of COSATU members (20 %) who have had little recent involvement in this area of union life.

Statistical tests revealed that there was some relationship between geographic region and participation in shop steward elections, with Western Cape workers being the least likely to have participated. Further analysis revealed that there was a highly significant (although somewhat weaker) relationship between union membership and participation in shopsteward elections. SACTWU members were lease likely to have participated, followed by SAMWU and SACCAWU. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of COSATU workers regularly participate in this aspect of union affairs.

Place Fig.5 about here

Slightly more than half of shopstewards were elected by secret ballot, with most of the remainder elected by way of show of hands (fig. 5). Thus, at least half of COSATU's membership are familiar with the procedures of voting by secret ballot, representing a firm basis for democratic participation both politically and in the workplace.

### 3.4 Mandates and Accountability

Place Fig.6 about here

When electing shopstewards, ninety nine percent of respondents believed that they had given shop stewards a one or other mandate to carry out directions from the shopfloor, rather than a completely open-ended brief. Two thirds felt that the mandate entailed consultation with workers every time decisions were made that may affect them (fig. 6). However, one third felt that this was only necessary as far as important issues are concerned. In other words, the overwhelming majority saw that shopstewards were issued with rather narrowly-defined mandates.

Place Fig.7 about here

Again, most COSATU workers believed in strictly-defined notions of accountability. Seventy-seven percent believed that shopstewards are expected to report back to workers every time they acted on workers' behalf. Should they not do so, almost all who responded to this question said that workers should have the right to dismiss shopstewards (fig. 7). However, many respondents chose not to respond to this

question. Even so, almost one third of respondents had experience of shopstewards being dismissed at their current place of employment. The reasons for the dismissals are not known, but whatever they are, the results demonstrate that workers do apply their power to dismiss shopfloor representatives they do not deem to be acting in their interest.

### 3.5 Attendance at Union Meetings

Seventy-six percent of respondents claimed to have attended at least one union meeting within the last month. On the other hand almost one tenth had never attended union meetings. Thus, there is evidence that a segment of union membership is not formally involved in union affairs.

Perhaps, as Pateman (1970:83) suggests, there may be a linkage between the types of decisions made and the degree of participation. It seems evident that there will be a greater willingness to participate in decision making, should the issues covered be of more immediate concern. In other words, the amount of democratic participation may be affected by whether the union has its primary focus on day-to-day shopfloor issues, or on national level policy concerns. It is through such visible democracy that active participation can be ensured over the long term.

It was in the Western Cape region that workers were least likely to attend union meetings. Meeting attendance was lowest amongst SACCAWU, CAWU, and CWIU members. Against this must be considered the large deviation in responses amongst CWIU members, with 52% attending meetings on a weekly basis. Even among SACCAWU and CAWU members a sizeable grouping went to union meeting regularly.

Thus, there seems to be a high level of participation in union affairs amongst almost all COSATU affiliates, again indicating that the internal democracy characteristic of many of the early independent unions has successfully been preserved.

### 3.6 Participation and Democracy

Place Table 1 about here

Table 1 compares participation in union meetings with the method of acquiring shopstewards, that is, whether the shop stewards were elected by members or appointed by the union. This is of particular importance in that it reflects the relationship between participation and democracy within the union movement. There is a statistically significant relationship between the two: in those workplaces where

there is a high level of attendance, there are also likely to be democratically-elected shopstewards. In other words, high levels of participation also result in high levels of union democracy.

It is possible that the relationship between the two variables may be a two-way one. Workers would be more motivated to participate in union structures should democratic practices be the norm, and when it is possible for them to have a real impact on union structures. Similarly, high levels of attendance at union meetings would make it easier to call shopstewards to account and greatly facilitate the holding of regular elections.

Most workers surveyed reported high levels of shopfloor democracy. The unions seem indeed fortunate in being in a high participation-high democracy cycle. New recruits socialised into such an environment would ultimately contribute to its reinforcement. However, the democracy-participation cycle is vulnerable to external pressures, such as the need for engagement in wider socio-political issues.

### 3.7 Skill versus Participation in Trade Union Activities

Place Table 2 about here

Table 2 compares skill level with attendance at union meetings. This relationship was statistically significant. Thus, it is not only the case that the unions have a component of workers who possess some degree of skill, but it is precisely these workers who are most likely to participate in union affairs.

This finding would seem to reinforce the argument that the unions represent a particular, highly privileged, segment of the labour market, namely those who possess a degree of skill. There is little doubt that union members can be seen to constitute an 'insider' segment of the labour market in comparison to the unemployed, rural poor, and informally employed 'outsiders'. However, there is considerable evidence to support the supposition that skill does not represent the most significant division, and that unions have generally been successful in representing the interests of all their members. It has been the most active and effective COSATU affiliates that have succeeded in compressing the wage-skill differential (Wood 1994:156). In other words, the unions remain rather broad bodies, seeking to maximise the benefits of all their members, regardless of skill level.

### 3.8 Union Democracy and Length of Union Membership

Is internal democracy an historical anomaly, associated with recent unionization? A Kruskal-Wallace analysis, of attendance at union meetings by the length of time individuals had been members of the union movement, revealed that there was no pattern or linkage between the two. However, there was a relationship between workers' attendance at union meetings and length of time they had been members of their current union. It does seem to be the case that workers who joined their current union in the late 1980s or early 1990s are more likely to participate in union affairs. Nonetheless, most long-standing union members still took part in union affairs on a regular basis. Thus, whilst high levels of participation in union affairs is not confined to those who have most recently joined the union movement, it is apparent that those who have been members of the same union for a relatively long period of time are somewhat less likely to attend union meetings.

### 3.9 Diversity and Democracy: Tendency towards a Democratic Culture

The formation of COSATU represented the bringing together of a number of diverse traditions of unionism. The process of union unity indeed represent a number of coalitions, between those with differing approaches to union organization, between different categories of workers, and between political and workplace activists. Firstly, as noted above, it seems that certain unions are marked by lower levels of democratic participation than others. Nonetheless, a general tendency seems to have been towards a common democratic culture. In other words, in view of the high levels of democratic participation encountered in almost all unions, it seems that it was the participative tradition gained dominance during the unification and consolidation of the union movement. This lends confirmation to Erwin's perception that a democratic ethic had been established in the FOSATU unions and the expectation existed amongst workers that the unions ought to be democratic. As Pateman (1990:104) notes, 'we learn to participate by participating'. In other words, participation in democratic structures is a self-reinforcing phenomenon. Those socialised in a participative environment are indeed more likely to actively participate in the future (ibid.:105). This can largely explain the endurance of union shopfloor democracy in many cases two decades after its inception.

### 3.10 The Challenges facing Union Democracy

As Arendt (1965:218) notes, an initial wave of grassroots collective action, although founded on democratic practices, will not always ensure lasting accountability and representivity. Organizations dedicated to change tend to have high levels of democratic commitment and practice at their inception. Fairly soon, however, this becomes subsumed by the desire to ensure organizational stability and continuity (Arendt 1965:219). This desire can inhibit both internal democracy and the capacity to effectively engage in collective action in the future.

This represents one of the major dilemmas facing the independent unions today. Unlike earlier attempts at mass unionization, the independent unions succeeded in consolidating early gains and survived periodic bouts of state repression. They also have moved beyond a reliance on a few key activists. However, this could have had some impact on the earlier organizational vitality. Although, as noted above, the early shopfloor democracy has persisted, questions emerge as to the relationship between union leaders and their constituency and the possibility of bureaucratization. Many workers have had experience of having dismissed shopstewards who failed to carry out their wishes, but it is unclear how far this direct accountability has extended up union structures. Contrary to conventional wisdom, shopfloor democracy has survived a gradual process of institutionalization.

### 3.11 Democratic Rupture in Unions at National Level

Although shopfloor democracy was still intact in COSATU in 1994 the same could not be said about worker participation in trade union involvement at national level. The survey found consistently that workers bore very little knowledge about major national affairs their unions were involved in and that they also did not participate in such affairs. This applied to the unions' involvement in the National Manpower Commisssion (NMC), the National Economic Forum (NEF), and the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP).

On average 74% of the workers interviewed did not know what the NMC, the NEC, or the RDP was. The results showed very little variance. The lowest percentage was 71% for the RDP and the highest was 76% for the NEF. Furthermore, the level of participation in the activities of the NMC or NEF was negligibly small: only 12% of the workers claimed to have been at a report-back meeting on the NMC while only 15% could recall being at a union meeting where the NEF was being discussed. Similarly only 15% of the interviewees had participated in any way in the formulation of the RDP.

## 4. Understanding of Parliamentary Democracy

Workers transferred their understanding of trade union shopfloor democracy directly to their expectations of parliamentary democracy. They expected their political party to display the same degree of representativeness and accountability as practised by their shop stewards on the shopfloor. No less than 68% of respondents (440 out of 643) were of the view that their political party had to consult with its supporters on all issues, and when the party makes decisions in parliament that affects it supporters it must report back every time. About 29% were of the opinion that the party had to consult with and report back to its supporters only on important issues affecting them while a negligibly small 3% regarded it as unnecessary for the party to consult or report back because it had been elected to represent their interest.

COSATU workers were therefore clear that they did not regard the act of voting as an open mandate for the party they support. About two-thirds of respondents expected the party to receive a mandate from its supporters on every issue and to report back to them on every issue; clearly an unworkable expectation. Respondents went even further and a majority (59%) felt that they should be able to recall their party if it did not do what its supporters wanted. This result has to be treated with caution though as 235 (37%) of the workers interviewed did not respond to the question, indicating an uncertainty either with what was meant by the question or with how to answer it.

### 4.1 Material Expectations from New Government

In spite of the fact that most of the workers interviewed did not know what the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) is, they expressed high expectations that it would deliver benefits in virtually all areas of social need identified by the RDP. What is of particular interest to this paper is what the workers said they would do if the new government fails to deliver the benefits. The thrust of their answer was that they would put pressure on the government through some or other form of action rather than bringing about change through the ballot box. Analysing the results more closely the strongest support (72%) was for participating in on-going mass action to force the government to deliver on its promises. Strong support was also expressed for two other forms of pressure: taking collective action by the unions, and putting pressure on former unionists that were sent to parliament. Both options received support from 65% of the respondents. Voting for another party in the next election was supported by 40% of the respondents (with 26% giving no response), while 30%

response), while 30% backed the formation of an alternative party that would provide the benefits (31% gave no response to this option).

### 4.2 Political Expectations from the New Government

The workers surveyed did not however think that the new government would act unilaterally in matters affecting workers. No less than 75% were of the opinion that it would not be possible for the new government to make policies affecting unions without consulting the unions.

There was, however, a scepticism on the part of the workers about the extent to which political parties and parliament could be relied upon to look after worker interests. Whereas 94% of the workers interviewed were of the opinion that workers would always need trade unions to protect their interests, they were uncertain whether political parties would in fact do so. A majority (51%) were of the opinion that workers could not rely on political parties to protect their interests; 37% thought they could always rely on political parties, while 12% did not know. There was however less scepticism about parliament itself: 60% regarded it as the best forum for workers to pursue their own interests, 25% disagreed, while the remaining 15% did not know.

Workers interviewed were however of the opinion that it was possible to make political parties look after worker interests. They also strongly agreed on the best way of doing so: an overwhelming majority (79%) agreed with the statement that 'the best way to ensure that political parties look after worker interests is to have many former trade unionists as members of that party'.

### Implications and Conclusion

A key issue to emerge from the survey is a concern on the part of COSATU workers about how they are going to ensure the representativeness and accountability of the parliamentarians they have voted into power; that is, how they are going to ensure that the government of national unity is going to act in the interests of the working class.

The new government does have some leeway in that workers do not expect it to act exclusively in the interests of the working class. In the survey only 4% of the COSATU workers thought that a political party which drew the majority of its supporters from workers had to represent only the interests of workers, while 39% thought that it had to represent the interests of all its supporters, including those who were not workers. In a remarkable display of altruism, a further 20% of respondents thought a worker

party had to represent the interests of all South Africans, even if worker interests had to be sacrificed.

But even so, it is clear from the survey that OCSATU workers have real economic and political expectations from the new government. They will thus expect it to deliver and hold the ANC responsible for such delivery.

However, the ANC and government of national unity are going to be subject to many pressures from outside the ranks of the working class. Firstly, because the ANC is itself a multi-class party, secondly, because of the demands from other social classes that their needs be met, and thirdly, because of the conditions that have to be met to ensure sustained economic growth. Of the demands from other social classes three clear groups can be identified, the petty bourgeoisie in the form of small and micro business entrepeneurs, the domestic bourgeoisie, namely the corporate and financial gaints of South Africa, and the international bourgeoisie in charge of global corporations and financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank.

The small business men and women will put pressure on the government to create favourable conditions to ensure the profitability of their enterprises by having little or no regulation. This could constitute a threat to the labour standards COSATU would wish to maintain. Both domestic and international capital will put pressure on the government to create the necessary climate and conditions for investment to take place in South Africa. This will include not only an absence of violence, but greater stability in the workplace. To achieve this the strike level will have to be reduced. Finally, the requirements of sustainable economic growth will place the need for strict budgetary restraint on the government which, in turn, will place a limit on the state's capacity to spend money on reconstruction and development. Given these social forces it is not unreasonable to expect that the new government will at times act in ways that COSATU would deem to consider to be against its members interests.

The confidence that COSATU members have in former trade unionists in parliament to represent their interests is very unlikely to materialise. This is because of the form parliamentary democracy has assumed under the new constitution. The requirement of power-sharing has meant that key decisions have been taken in the cabinet rather than in the ANC parliamentary caucus. (9) But even if parliamentary decision-making were to be democratised, severe restraints would still be placed on individual ANC members of parliament. They will be bound by majority

9. *Weekly Mail*, 'Ramaphosa flexes his caucus muscles,' June 24-30, 1994, p.4.

decisions in the caucus with very little room left for dissent. The ability of former COSATU members, for instance, to resign from the party and remain in parliament as COSATU representatives does not exist as the constitution requires them to vacate their seats forthwith (section 43(b)). In addition, the method of parliamentary representation through lists rather than constituencies, means that individual parliamentarians are not accountable to constituencies. Even if the ANC were to implement its plan to give all its members of parliament constituencies to take care of, the reality at the end of the day is that those constituencies do not have the power to dismiss 'their' members of parliament.

The only recourse of effective action left to COSATU should the new government of national unity act against the workers interests would thus be collective action. To be effective, it would have to take place at the national level. What its effects would be for the COSATU-ANC alliance is hard to predict. What is clear though, is that COSATU workers are going to have to adapt their understanding of parliamentary democracy over the next five years if they wish to ensure that worker interests are adequately represented in the new parliament.

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## Endnotes

Figure 1: When first joined a trade union.
Figure 2: Do you have shopstewards in your workplace?
Figure 3: Method of electing shopstewards.
Figure 4: When last participated in shopsteward elections.
Figure 5: How shopstewards are appointed.
Figure 6: When should a shopsteward consult?
Figure 7: "If a shopsteward does not act as workers wish, they should be able to dismiss her/him".
Figure 8: Has a shopsteward ever been dismissed by workers?
Table 1: Election of shopstewards vs attendance at TU meetings.
Table 2: Skill vs attendance at TU meetings.