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South Africa

New trade union federation launched

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Nearly 700,000 workers from 24 trade unions have joined to form a new trade union federation in South Africa, the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), held its inaugural congress at the end of April. A total of 1,384 voting delegates from the 24 unions attended the congress to decide on the new federation's name, logo, colours, agenda and constitution. Former Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi was central to launching the federation and below we reproduce an interview conducted earlier in April with Vavi by Amandla.

Amandla! (A!): The launch of the new federation has just been postponed. Why is that?

Zwelinzima Vavi (ZV): Two unions that are very critical in the process are facing some challenges internally about resources. They are the unions who will be sending most of the delegates to the congress: Numsa 702 delegates and Fawu 270 delegates. With the challenges they were facing it became apparent that they will not be in a position to send full delegations on 24 March.

Because we want to make not a half statement but a full statement, we found that it was better to just postpone and allow them to be with us in full, so that is why we postponed it. So it is postponed just for a month to April 21 to 23.

A: And what has been happening on the ground to build for the launch?

ZV: There is an excitement, I mean on the ground people are ready, people are looking forward to this new giant rising and if you judge by the numbers of people that have been coming to the shop steward councils. Wow... Western Cape was a full house, a small venue but quite full, but in Limpopo we had 1,000 shop stewards plus. Incredible. In Gauteng we had 1,000 shop stewards. In the Eastern Cape we had 1,000 shop stewards. Last year in December we visited Northern Cape and North West provincial shop steward Council. We are going to KZN and I can promise you now we will have a full house, and then we go to Mpumalanga. That will be the last one. In those shop steward councils we get them to endorse their own provincial programmes, Secondly, we get them to set up their own interim structures. And we get them ready to back the demands we have submitted at Nedlac through our section 77 Notice.

In all of those structures, all of those campaigns are so warmly received. As I speak to you, in all of these provinces we are setting up locals, we have had a picket in the Western Cape, we have had demonstrations already in Gauteng around the budget day, they are linking up with the Outsourcing Must Fall.

A!: There are some people who will say that you talk about a federation but actually this is really just Numsa and a few friends. Most of the shop stewards council is Numsa. What would you say to that?

ZV: No, they will be mistaken. Of course Numsa is the biggest union in South Africa. Even in Cosatu it used to draw the biggest numbers in any march. That's natural. But 21 unions have written letters to us to say they have a congress mandate. That gives us a membership of 684,000 plus. And 17 unions are in the queue. They need to go through the similar mandate processes.

Nobody before has ever put together a federation of nearly 700,000 members, even before a launch, even before agreement on a logo or a constitution or even leadership. This is history in the making.

And there is diversity. There are completely different organisational cultures and political backgrounds. But I think we

have the glue that can get those unions to stick to one another.

AI: So what difference is this federation going to make? What is the difference going to be between this federation and Cosatu? Or is it just a kind of Cosatu Mark 2?

ZV: No ways. We have closed the chapter on Cosatu. Cosatu was part of the alliance – that was its mainstay, even during its best days of battles against e-tolls, battles against labour brokers, even when it fought privatisation and fought against job-loss blood baths from as early as 1999 / 2000. But Cosatu was always open to an attack that you are campaigning and fighting and all of this things, but then we had to go and vote for the ANC in the next elections.

Now that will not be. That card will not be played against us. We are completely independent from any political party. And the Alliance is shaking to the core, because they fear that for the first time workers will be politically uncompromised and that they will be able to stand up on their own and challenge a terrible status quo that works for the 1% in South Africa and the 1% all over the world.

AI: So will the new federation be willing to rebuild the unity of the labour movement by participating in joint events with other federations, including Cosatu?

ZV: We look at this launch as a very important milestone in the history to build worker militancy and worker unity. But it is only an important milestone, it's definitely not a point of achieving that unity. We are putting together 41 unions for now. That is a remarkable achievement.

But we are not naive or arrogant. We know that this is only a first step in a journey that we are undertaking to build that unity of workers in South Africa. So in this congress we will be acutely aware that there are 182 registered unions in South Africa. To get 41 of them under one roof is absolutely a critical step, but it is not the end of the road.

We have invited both Fedusa and Nactu to form part of the deliberations and to have their say in terms of what they think the road should be in terms of unifying South African Workers. We have decided not to invite Cosatu. Frankly, in the view of the majority of the members of the steering committee, Cosatu forms part of the ruling elite of society that has brought misery, pain, confusion and the highest levels of unemployment, and widespread poverty that is now deciding that black workers are worth R20 an hour, and that is forming part of this feeding hyena that is eating on the carcass of South Africa's moral fibre.

And people felt that it will be quite an insult to bring those people into a congress where workers are desperately trying to build something new from the ashes of the old. Frankly in our view, the ashes of the old is Cosatu itself.

AI: Do you rule out in the future marching together with Cosatu workers as well as Nactu workers?

ZV: No ways, no. I am not ruling that one out because the future is the future. If Cosatu for example was to fall in a different type of leadership. If its unions were to have a different kind of leadership that embraces full unity of workers and that is genuinely taking up issues. Not the one that currently exists where all of its issues are influenced by how they advance the interest of those factions in the ANC. They have learnt nothing about being a Zuma federation before. They are now embracing another capitalist in the form of Cyril Ramaphosa. They are trying to pull wool over the eyes of workers to tell them that this multi-billionaire will be a messiah of workers. And we know that if Ramaphosa goes to the Presidency it will be about advancing neoliberalism. It will be about NDP, Gear and appeasing rating agencies left, right and centre. It will be about giving the hot air of a radical economic formation to the working class, when their unemployment is deepening and deindustrialisation is deepening and poverty and

income inequalities are deepening and widening.

Ramaposa won't shake any of the fundamental foundations around which neoliberal and frankly austerity measures are now sitting.

AI: So you talk about the new federation, as an campaigning federation as an active federation. What do you see as the key campaign targets for the new federation and how would the federation pursue those campaigns?

ZV: There are issues we submitted at Nedlac as demands:

Number 1 we said is jobs, is the economy that must be restructured. It's about finding a plan that government must pursue the demands we have frankly been making for many years. The current structure of the economy is just not in a position to create jobs for South African workers.

We have taken up a campaign against the proposed minimum wage that they have now signed, all three federations, deep in the pockets of government and the bosses. They are putting R20 an hour, which will have declined in value by 2018 or 2019. And even in 2018 the deal says the employers can still write letters to exempt themselves.

We have taken up the campaign against the assault on the right to strike. These fellows have agreed that workers must be forced to ballot. This opens a window to employers to interdict strikes based on the technicalities of the ballot process. And they are saying now that strikes must be limited. Whenever the bosses feel the strike is taking far too long, as the 5 months Marikana strike did, the bosses must be able to force the parties into a compulsory arbitration, even on issues of interest.

We are taking up the battle on education, on the dysfunctional public education system. In line with our philosophy that the trade union movement can't afford to be narrow about just service to members, just issues of wages, just issues of overalls and health and safety.

We want a movement of working people. A movement of the working people will have to consciously cater for the interest of the unemployed and will have to take up the battles of the students. It will have to take up the battles of the pensioners and it will have to take up issues of social wage and comprehensive social security with the same vigour as it takes up issues of better wages and improved working conditions.

From grade R, basically there is absolutely chaos now. We have a basic education system that sidelines 50% of our youth, who leave the system without any form of education and enter the long queues of what the bosses are now saying are the lost generation – unemployable.

We want to take up the battle for free compulsory, decolonised but high quality public education at the university level.

We will take up the battle for the collapsing public health care system, just like in education. There is excellent education. There is excellent public health care for a tiny minority in society whose standards compete with the best of the world. And there is a health care system that is victimised by Esedimeni and the death of psychiatric patients in Johannesburg. We are taking up that battle.

And we will be recruiting in the process of doing that. And, of course, we are already engaging a battle now for Outsourcing Must Fall and there are tremendous victories that have been scored. We are pushing that campaign in

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Johannesburg broadly so that it is no longer just about universities. We are taking it up with Transnet and Prasa and other state-owned enterprises.

The campaign against labour brokers gave workers in this country limited victories such as the amendment to the LRA to make sure that no one is employed perpetually for more than 3 months. But we know that employers are just sidelining that and they are doing as they please. They are not being held accountable by the unions that are weak and they are not being held accountable by the department of labour that is directionless.

AI: There are clearly far more precarious workers in the South African labour force than there used to be. And the unions seem to have been really poor at organising them – unwilling or unable, however you see it. They have been organised by students or by small unions who were set up for the purpose or political organisations. What is the federation actually going to do about this, apart from just talk about it?

ZV: We are already doing something about it. On 22 March we marched to the Gauteng legislature. The intention was to occupy it for a day and to bring it the attention of the country and to demand action on the part of government to better monitor and to ensure compliance with the law in every firm.

We were in a rally on 18 February, the first rally where we raised the flags of the new federation, to say outsourcing must fall. We have teamed up with these workers and students who have been campaigning alone. They are no longer campaigning alone. They are campaigning alongside the new federation to fight the outsourcing.

And it's not just an issue confined to the capitalists. The government has outsourced thousands and thousands of workers in hospitals, in schools and in the prisons, everywhere. A federation or union that does not take this up will not become a labour movement. They will become just a narrow trade union of the few employed, who are only very happy to get predictable wages at the end of the month. Whereas others out there get wages minus any form of benefit in the form of either medical aid or in the forms of pensions.

AI: Broadly, how do you see the state of the labour movement? You can see that there has been quiet for a long time. The government obviously feels like it can get away with things like the minimum wage and the restriction on the right of strikes. Is the labour movement at a historically weak point at the moment?

ZV: It is at its weakest point, and that is demonstrated by the free fall of the numbers of workers who belong to unions. This year it has fallen to 23% or 24%. It's demonstrated by the fact that 54% of all wages are set by the employers without any negotiations either with the unions or with the workers themselves. Only 23% of wages are set through collective bargaining structures, and worse, only about 9% through the sectoral bargaining system. South Africa has 182 registered unions. That is a full blown fragmentation. The Department of Labour says there are another 400 unions waiting to be registered. That is a disaster.

We are moving away from one union, one industry, one country, one federation, towards a one man, one union, one woman one union situation. We think that this new federation can lead to a serious deepening of unity amongst workers.

AI: What happened to Nactu and especially what happened to Amcu in this situation? I think a lot of people were looking forward to the giants Amcu and Numsa joining together. What happened?

ZV: Both Fedusa and Nactu, at the senior leadership level, were in agreement that the time to unify has arrived, up to the workers summit. Fedusa pulled out even before the workers summit. Nactu stayed beyond the workers summit

and had a historic May Day celebration with us.

Amcu, even on May Day, had their own rally. They blamed it on the fact that it was long planned and all of that. Amcu worked with us to develop a framework for a campaign against job losses and that framework is still there, by the way.

We were excited at the possibility and I don't know what happened. Only Amcu can say. All of a sudden we heard noises that they didn't want to be swallowed and we couldn't just understand what does that mean. They are so big and they were being offered a chance to shape the constitution that will give adequate autonomy to every union to run its own affairs.

Look, we have not given up, either on Nactu or Fedusa or even Amcu. This is only a start of a process and we hope that one day very soon, whenever the Nactu congress will be held, that the majority will say that the federation was started by us with Nactu, because that is literally what happened. They wouldn't be able to explain to anybody why they are not part of it and why they slowly just moved away from it.

AI: When Amandla! interviewed you in 2015 we asked you whether you were going to be available to be the general secretary of the new federation and you said no, you have done your time now. What are you saying today?

ZV: That would have been my feeling. People must get a new champion to be general secretary, a younger person as I said. And frankly I've not seen any discussion about that alternative. People seem to be advancing an argument that says if I had to pull out now it will be such an anti-climax, in the context of the role I played to bring everybody together.

That discussion is not over, the leadership discussion is only starting now and let's see what happens.

[Amandla](#)