



INTERVIEW

ACTION — NEGOTIATION

Interview with Mike Madlala

NEGOTIATION — ACTION

MIKE MADLALA, the co-ordinator of COSATU's Labour Market Negotiations Task Force, and assistant general secretary of FAWU speaks to Snuki Zikalala.

In this time of escalation of trade union actions on both industrial and political issues, what is the role of COSATU's four negotiation task forces? Are negotiations still on the agenda?

We in the trade unions believe that all negotiations should be backed up by action on the ground. Our constituency is always kept informed to back up negotiations. The power of trade unions in their negotiating strategies lies in the fact that strikes are there to be used to apply pressure so that the tabled demands are met.

On the other hand, when we take action, we do not rule out negotiations. We are constantly in processes of negotiation in the industrial field and more widely. COSATU withdrew from the National Manpower Commission (NMC) process as a protest action, but the federation did not stop negotiating with relevant bodies to improve the workers rights. We have met with the Minister of Manpower. The Department of Manpower participated in

the restructuring of the Training Boards. We also continue to negotiate even with organisations like the South African Agricultural Union (SAAU).

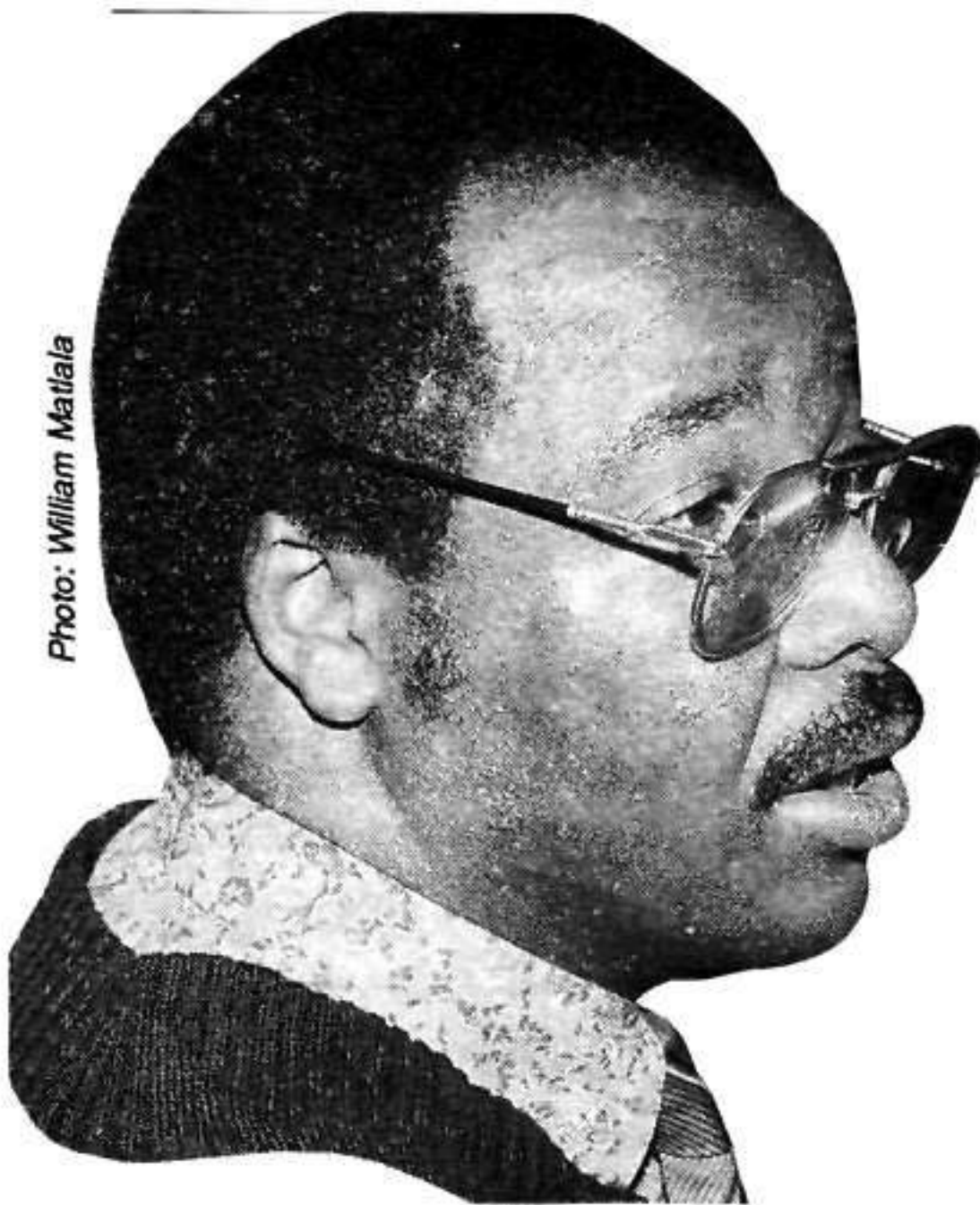
In short, we shall continue negotiating in the four task forces. If such negotiations do not deliver the goods, we will not hesitate to act.

In the recent restructuring at COSATU headquarters you were appointed to co-ordinate one of the four negotiation task forces - the 'labour market task force'. What exactly is the role of this task force?

Labour market institutions are those state structures, departments of government, and so on, which deal with developing policies and implementing programmes relating to many different fields of labour rights and regulations.

In a future democratic South Africa, it is our intention that the labour market institutions should not only deal with issues like the Labour Relations Act, but macro-economic

Photo: William Matlala



issues such as job creation programmes, housing and others.

There is still a debate within COSATU at this stage whether such labour market institutions should be bipartite, involving only representatives of business and labour or whether they should be tripartite. If tripartite, they would involve the state, but to what extent should the state be involved, or what kind of intervention does the state have?

These labour negotiating institutions should have an important voice in shaping future policies affecting their constituencies, but there is agreement that the role of a future democratic parliament to legislate on labour and economic matters should not be taken away by the labour market institutions.

At this stage, however, the key concern on COSATU's labour market task force agenda is *to work on the extension of labour legislation to cover farm workers, domestic workers and public sector workers.*

Public sector workers are quite well organised to defend their rights, but farm and domestic workers are not. During this parliamentary session, we exerted a lot of

pressure for domestic workers to have basic rights in terms of the Basic Condition of Employment Act (BCEA). It is not going to be easy, but we will continue to fight for their rights.

Our task force also deals with questions relating to the incorporation of the workers in the bantustans and homelands under the same legislation as workers in the rest of South Africa. Quite a lot of changes are evident in this regard. Kangwane and the Transkei have engaged some South African labour lawyers to draft and develop their own labour legislation in line with that of South Africa.

We have also been involved in preparing a strong case to present to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which finally came to South Africa to investigate labour relations in our country. Most of our recommendations have been accepted by the ILO.

Following on from that visit, we are waiting for the government to extend the basic rights which are enshrined in the BCEA to farm and domestic workers and the Unemployment Insurance Act, as well as extending the Labour Relations Act and the Wage Act for farm and domestic workers.

As one of the COSATU affiliates that organises farm workers, can you say something about the farm workers conference which was held on 5 June?

The farm workers conference was organised by FAWU, and we invited the other sister unions like PPWAWU and SACTWU which also organise some rural workers. Amongst the resolutions passed was our endorsement, in principle, of the COSATU resolution which urges the formation of an independent farm workers union.

The proposed farm workers union faces the *serious challenge of beginning the task of organising the 1,3 million unorganised agricultural workers in our country.* The 26 000 rural workers that have already been organised into FAWU, 10 000 organised into PPWAWU, 3 000 organised into SACTWU and 2 000 into other unaffiliated unions - all of

them put together, are just a drop in the ocean.

The conference discussed the serious problem of resources for such a massive project. In terms of financial resources, farm workers earn such extremely low - and even no! - wages, and it is extremely difficult to expect union subscriptions from them. There is also a big problem of how to collect union dues. For example, some farm workers are paid in kind and some in cash.

In terms of human resources, at this stage there are laws which make it very difficult for organisers even to reach farm workers. Organisers going onto farms can be accused of trespass and - with the political climate in most of the farming areas - they run the danger of being beaten up and even shot. There is very little access to farm workers in South Africa.

There is another practical problem in organising farm workers which relates to the question of boundaries - that is, the overlap of farm workers and industrial workers. For instance, some work part of the year on the farms and part in the factories. How should they be classed, agricultural or industrial workers? These are some things that still need to be clarified.

The conference also addressed practical issues: wages and trade union rights, abolition of the tot system and child labour, health and safety and a provident fund for the farm workers. And in the current drought situation we discussed food and financial relief for farm workers.

What is the position of the national farm employers association, SAAU, in response to these demands?

SAAU has been the stumbling block throughout. They have been putting their foot down against labour legislation to be extended to farm workers, even if they have not come out publicly. They have lobbied some of the MP's in parliament against the extension of the LRA to farm workers.

More seriously, white farmers are not prepared to work with the trade unions. The thing they hate most are trade unions because, if the unions have a presence in the agricultural areas, they will ensure that the legislation is

actually put into practice.

Some farmers might be prepared to have the Act but they do not want to have unions representing workers. They believe farm workers are their property. They are almost their slaves. Workers cannot say anything against their bosses.

Farmers are also dismissing workers in anticipation of labour legislation. For government to continue delaying promulgation, makes the workers more vulnerable. At present the biggest problem on the farms is that the white farmers are taking advantage of the drought and just retrenching and dismissing workers without any regard for their rights and their desperate situation.

How is the drought affecting people in the rural areas?

The drought is affecting millions of people very severely. The most affected people are those who live in the rural areas and especially the farm workers. And because of mass retrenchments and dismissals, farm workers are now moving from the farms to squatter areas around the towns.

In some places, workers have had to sell their cattle to the farmer for almost nothing because once they are thrown off the farms they don't have anywhere to keep their cattle. Others are selling them in desperation before they die from lack of water. It is a pathetic situation.

What were COSATU's relief proposals at the drought conference which was held on 13-14 June?

We tabled a number of proposals at the conference. The most urgent is that farm workers have to be given relief and that it should be on the basis that:

- There should be an immediate moratorium on retrenchments.
- Unions should have access to the farms.
- There must be a joint control of relief distribution.

The government's R3,8 billion aid package for drought relief is going to the farmers, not directly to the most needy which are the farm

workers. We argue that, if there is no access for the trade unions, there would be no monitoring mechanism to see that the drought aid package received by farmers, especially for farm workers, and social relief is properly distributed.

What are the effects of the movement of farm workers from the farms to urban areas?

With farm workers moving into the urban areas, they will be increasing the pool of unemployed workers there. The employers are going to exploit the situation and employ people who are prepared to settle for starvation wages. We therefore expect this to become a burning issue.

It is expected that over 80 000 jobs will be lost due to the drought. The majority will be in the food industry. In this the drought will not only affect the rural areas but the urban areas as well. Retrenchments, dismissals and the movement of farm workers to the urban areas also has a more direct effect on us as FAWU because it affects the food producing and processing industry as a whole. With this drought, there will be a reduction in fresh produce coming from the farms to the vegetable and fruit factories. Owners of those factories will then talk about retrenchments. FAWU is going to be affected by this process. We will not be in a very strong position because labour is in abundance, with many unemployed rural workers moving to towns.

Is the drought affecting food prices? Or are they rising because of higher wages in the food industries as some people argue?

We have actually made our own research in relation to price hikes. Some research institutes have come up with a variety of things, indicating that labour and the wage increases have caused the huge food price hikes.

We found that this is not correct because most wages are negotiated around June-July. The level of increment that we received this year does not differ from the past years' increments. There are no grounds for anyone to say that labour has contributed to the food price hikes.

Food producing companies are accusing catering companies; catering companies accusing the farmers. One thing for certain is that the dramatic food price rises came immediately after the introduction of VAT. We are still arguing that if the government would maintain a subsidy on food, and on basic services, there would be no need to raise food prices.

As a member of the VAT Co-ordinating Committee (VCC) can you tell us if there is any progress on re-opening negotiations on VAT and food prices?

We have actually agreed on a number of processes. We have met the ministers of finance, health and agriculture and discussed the re-opening of VAT negotiations and the stabilisation of food prices.

The ministers promised to come back to us after we tabled our demands which are:

- the establishment of a focus group to look at VAT on basics and reducing food prices;
- commitment to discuss the poverty relief programme with the VCC and the welfare development sectors; and
- a full investigation into the effects of VAT and the validity of Central Statistical Services figures.

We are still waiting for the ministers to come back to us.

Are you planning any active anti-VAT campaigns if the government does not meet your demands?

We agreed at the VAT summit, on 6 June 1992, that a committee be formed to look at the various issues related to action if the government continues to resist our demands.

Actions that were proposed include stayaways, occupation of government offices, marches and even a general strike. That committee will then come with recommendations to the VCC which will take a decision on actions based on the needs and capacities of its component members.

How do such actions link in with the various trade union actions already going on, and to the broader campaign

of mass action that is looking toward a general strike in August?

It is my view that all actions by the trade unions, including those of the VAT campaigns, when directing their blows against the enemy - no matter how minor such blows may be - will be part of the whole mass action.

Mass action will take many and varied forms. The important thing is that order and discipline should be the governing principle.

Can you say something about the broad coalition of democratic forces that is being built up around the demands for an end to the security forces' covert operations and murders, government corruption and mismanagement and so on?

Within COSATU we have actually discussed this very extensively. It is our belief that during the time of the Mass Democratic Movement we were able to rally a very wide range of forces around issues which were common to all. We need that sort of force now.

A broad coalition of democratic forces will focus its campaign on ending government corruption and murder. This is not a new campaign. It is our belief that as long as the apartheid regime is still in power, we will not have peace and democracy in this country. Therefore, the broad coalition of democratic forces should not be seen only as a means of bringing people together, but as a powerful campaign that will contribute towards focusing on the many problems facing us all in South Africa.

We have learned from our past experience, and it has been reinforced in the more recent negotiations, that it is only with mass action that we can force the government really to listen to our voices. So we are going to force them to listen to us now on the burning issues of VAT and food prices, the suffering of the people under the drought and the horrors of violence, and to negotiate seriously for elections for a new democratic constituent assembly.

After the coalition has achieved its goal

of a democratically-elected constituent assembly, is the broad coalition going to continue to exist?

The coming together of people in the form of pacts or in the form of alliances has a purpose. You set yourself an objective and once it has been achieved, it is for the parties to decide whether their struggle is over or not. It would depend on the given conditions at that particular time. The common denominator is that apartheid must go.

Is this coalition going to end when the apartheid government is gone, or is it going to remain a force that will keep the future ANC government on its toes?

The civic organisations, which are one of the most important components of the democratic coalition, will still exist. Civics will have to continue to put pressure on the future government so that their demands are met.

We as trade unions will be independent of any political organisation and will continue fighting for workers rights. At this stage we are participating in influencing policy formulation in the ANC and we believe that in a future ANC government most of the rights that workers are fighting for will be taken into account.

If the ANC comes into power and asks the trade unions to play a 'constructive' role, to 'be patient' and not to embark on industrial actions 'in the national interest' and so on, what will be the trade unions' response?

Any such request from the government will be discussed by the trade unions in their structures democratically without any form of coercion. The unions will respond appropriately, according to the circumstances, whether to reject or accept such a proposal.

Already at this stage we are insisting on being an independent trade union movement. We will always remain independent from control by any government. I am convinced that if the government of the day - including an ANC government - does not respond to the needs of workers, the trade unions must still be in a position to stand up for their rights. ☆