

UNION UNITY

After nearly three years and six meetings the majority of "emerging" unions have agreed to form a federation of industrially based unions during the course of 1984. This is the outcome of the most recent meeting of the Feasibility Committee held on the 3rd and 4th of March at Khotso House in Johannesburg.

The unions and groupings which agreed to go ahead with the federation are Cape Town Municipal Workers' Association, Commercial Catering and Allied Workers' Union of South Africa, Food and Canning /African Food and Canning Workers' Union, General Workers' Union, Federation of South African Trade Unions and Council of Unions of South Africa. Together these unions have a membership of approximately 300,000 workers.

A press statement released after the meeting explained that progress towards union unity had been slow since April 1983 when the decision had first been taken to form a federation. This was because some unions, ones which were not demarcated along industrial lines, "were not ready or able to join a federation". It emerged that the unions present at the talks which fell into this category were the South African Allied Workers' Union, the General and Allied Workers' Union and Municipal and General Workers' Union of South Africa.* These three unions were offered observer status at the meeting or the alternative of demarcating along industrial lines and re-joining at a later stage. They rejected the offer of observer status and left the meeting.

At a press conference called by SAAWU, GAWU and

* The Orange Vaal General Workers' Union left the talks last year. The Motor Assembly and Components Workers'/General Workers' Union of South Africa was not present at the March talks.

MGWUSA on the 20th of March these unions denied that the fact that they were constituted as general unions had presented an obstacle to unity. They had all, they explained, already taken steps to demarcate their activities along industrial lines, and had in fact proposed to the unity meeting that inter-union unity should be approached through the formation of "industrial committees" comprising unions operating in the same sector. This idea, it may be noted, would seem to imply the suspension of the proposal to form regional solidarity action committees, the path to union unity favoured by these unions in the immediate past.

The three general unions felt that they should have been given more time to carry out the process of demarcation. Nevertheless all said they were still committed to industrial demarcation and expressed the desire to remain part of the unity initiative.

Serious difficulties have in fact arisen out of the differences in the methods of organising workers and associated structures of the regional-general unions on the one hand and the industrially constituted unions on the other. These organisational differences, and also the conflicting political views held by the leaderships of the different unions and groupings, have undoubtedly presented the major obstacles to union unity to date.

With the commitment of the regional-general unions to industrial demarcation the potential for divisive competition between these and the industrial unions party to the unity talks will hopefully be reduced. However, the process of restructuring of the general unions to conform to sectoral demarcation is likely to be lengthy and difficult. Whether these unions are accepted back in the unity talks as full participants will depend not only on whether they demarcate but also on how they undertake this process.

There are a number of possibilities: 1) internal demarcation to establish new industrial unions.

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This would serve to intensify competition and rivalry against existing industrial unions. 2) The establishment of status quo agreements to prevent poaching or competition in unorganised factories. 3) Focusing along industrial lines and co-operating with other unions on industrial committees. 4) Undertaking to gradually allow their organised factories to join existing industrial unions, and to organise unorganised sectors in which no industrial unions are at present operating. The third and fourth options are the most likely to bring about speedy re-acceptance of the general unions to the talks.

Although it now seems certain that a federation of "emerging" industrial unions will be formed this process will not be unproblematic. Political differences, particularly at leadership level, remain. The issue of non-racialism/racial exclusivity and the methods of union organisation and views on leadership associated with these opposed principles are still serious obstacles. What is required to overcome these differences is the acceptance of a commitment to work towards common political goals within a federation framework which allows for a diversity of views. The federation should be run in a way which enables different views to be tested out in open debate with the full participation of union membership.

The formation of a new federation will require the dismantling and re-construction of some union and (existing) federation structures. Unions operating in the same sectors will have to overcome the difficulties surrounding amalgamation or narrower demarcation. The greatest difficulties will be encountered where there are equally powerful unions operating in the same regions and sectors.

Dismantling existing federation structures may be difficult. Fosatu has agreed in principle to dismantle. Cusa as yet has not officially agreed to this, although its continued presence at the talks implies such a commitment.

A specific difficulty relates to the regional

structures within Fosatu. Some of the unaffiliated unions have expressed the view that these structures withdraw power from unions within Fosatu and concentrate it with the federation structures. The need to establish structures which enable workers from the different unions to come together to take up issues at a local level cannot be questioned, particularly for a federation which will concern itself with social and political conditions affecting workers outside the factory. The shop stewards' councils would seem to be more appropriate to this end than the regional structures within Fosatu, which embrace large areas including widely scattered townships.

The question of the structure of the federation is connected with its financing. Unions which have argued for greater union autonomy within the new federation have also maintained that the federation should be financed solely by its affiliates, particularly for its day-to-day running expenses. The reasoning behind this is that financial control is an important, perhaps the most important, control workers can exercise over officials. Both Cusa and Fosatu are at present heavily dependent on external sources of finance for maintaining federation activities. However most Fosatu affiliates are self-financing and the federation has committed itself to achieving self-sufficiency in the long term.

While these difficulties should not be underestimated, there is reason to be optimistic that they will be overcome. The turning points in the unity talks over the last three years have come at the larger meetings where workers, mandated from branches throughout South Africa, have demonstrated their capacity to exercise control over leadership; to ensure that abstract debates and personal differences are not allowed to stand in the way of worker's unity. All the remaining obstacles to union unity can be removed if direct worker participation of this kind is widened and deepened as unions meet in each locality to forge the new structures expressing their unity.

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The successful establishment of a federation of "emerging" industrial unions will have ramifications not only within industry but also far into the wider society. Its first task will undoubtedly be to organise the unorganised; still the vast majority of workers in employment. The organisation of whole sectors across the country will place limitations on the capacity of management to play off the unorganised against the organised workers in negotiations over wages and working conditions. The union movement will be placed in a stronger position to oppose managements' exploitation of regional differences in wages and working conditions, including the strategy of relocating plant in "border" areas. A more difficult task will be the prevention of relocation of plant from existing industrial locations to new sites within the bantustans.

In time the union movement must inevitably come squarely up against the bantustan and border industry policy which is fundamental to the state's present "reform" dispensation. The formation of a united union movement increases the chances that this policy can be opposed in more than just rhetorical terms.

All emerging unions in South Africa believe that any conditions affecting workers, whether inside or outside the factory, fall within their legitimate ambit. These unions have only differed over how and when to take up such issues. The formation of a new federation will greatly strengthen the ability of these unions to effectively take up the social and political demands of workers, whether within or independently of the emerging political movements in South Africa. For the first time in decades the possibility exists of the working class beginning to imprint its specific demands and perspectives on the South African political process.

(Johannesburg Correspondent, March 1984)