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The Politics of COSATU

Prepared by Herbert Jauch for The Villager newspaper

On 14 August the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (COSATU) Central Executive Committee (CEC) took a decision to suspend the long-serving Zwelinzima Vavi as its general secretary. An internal probe is currently underway to investigate an incidence of Vavi having sex with a subordinate staff member of the union federation. At first sight it thus seems that the suspension is merely a proper response to a possible abuse of power. Any abuse of women must be regarded as a very serious offence in a society where gender-based violence and discrimination is wide-spread. Any serious attempt to stamp out abuse of power in general and the abuse of women in particular must be welcome. Any union leader that is found guilty of abuse should be dealt with as a matter of principle as too often cases of sexual harassment and abuse are dealt with leniently – even within the labour movement.

However, there are other factors at play regarding Vavi's suspension. It seems that the matter is not primarily about COSATU taking a principled stance against abuse but that the incidence is merely used a convenient tool to fight an ongoing political battle within the union federation. Ahead of the COSATU CEC meeting, the largest affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) issued a statement which pointed to the deep-seated political divisions in the federation:

"In our view, the struggle for freedom in South Africa cannot be achieved without the popular democratic forces advancing a socialist oriented National Democratic Revolution. It is important to understand the significance of the socialist orientation, traditions and socialist revolutionary culture of COSATU because the crisis in COSATU today is in fact about whether or not COSATU should continue to be a socialist trade union federation or it should simply become a yellow capitalist federation of the workers or a labour desk of the bourgeoisie... The rupture in COSATU is between those want to give capitalism a human face through some Social Democratic approach and those who believe that we must in a radical fashion undo the continuation of capitalism and colonialism in South Africa... Those who want Comrade Zwelinzima Vavi out of COSATU want a COSATU which will be a "toy telephone", a "labour desk," a pro capitalist COSATU and those who are defending Comrade Vavi want a revolutionary socialist, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist COSATU".

This strong statement clearly draws the political battle lines within the South African union federation and comes after many years of COSATU being in an alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). The political left feels that since the 1990s the leadership of COSATU was captured by a political faction that has subordinated the independence of the labour movement to political interests of the ruling ANC. Union leaders were increasingly co-opted into parliament and into the ANC National Executive Committee. Thus the unions

basically sacrificed working class independence for an accommodation with capital and big business at the price of maintaining huge levels of inequality and unemployment.

South Africa has remained one of the most unequal countries in the world and since 2010 COSATU has repeatedly raised the issue of the country's self-serving "predatory elite" and warned of the emergence of a "predatory state" that was not only unable but also unwilling to move towards a programme of systematic redistribution as part of a socialist agenda. COSATU launched campaigns against corruption, labour brokers, the massive loss of jobs, e-tolls etc and criticised the National Development Plan. Thus a rift was emerging between the more radical groups within COSATU, spearheaded by Vavi and NUMSA and those completely loyal to the leadership of the ANC and SACP. This was the reason why the ANC/SACP faction in COSATU tried to get rid of Vavi even before COSATU's Congress of last year. They failed at that time but may succeed now by using the opportunity presented by the case of abuse of power.

No matter what happens to Vavi as an individual, the struggle for the political direction of the South African labour movement will continue. Faced with a massive global crisis of capitalism, expressed through huge levels of unemployment, poverty and inequality, radical union leaders such as those of NUMSA will certainly continue to fight for working class interests and a socio-economic order that serves the poor. This might lead to further splits and fragmentation of the labour movement as it touches on the historic question: should unions accommodate themselves with the existing order or should they embark on a process of renewal as a militant anti-capitalist movement? The battle lines are drawn...

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