

Where is the Tripartite Alliance?

Phahla began working in the 1980s as a casual worker and today is a shopsteward at Protea Industrial Chemicals and the chairperson of the union's Gauteng region. Phahla was born in Mpumalanga but moved to the Northern Province to complete his high school education. Shortly after moving to Gauteng he joined the Post Office but was dismissed following a strike.

Joining the labour movement

'On joining Telkom I became involved in Potwa and was active in their structures. Following a national strike where 3 000 members of Potwa were dismissed, including myself I became active in the community. After that I joined Protea Industrial Chemicals and have been a shopsteward there since 1990.

Globalisation and job losses

The capitalists are using the world to find new ways to make profits. In South Africa we have the growth, employment and redistribution strategy (Gear), which has led to outsourcing, privatisation and job losses. These policies are not really in favour of the working class and are meant for the minority of the capitalists internationalists. Multinational corporations (MNCs) come into the country and buy up their competitors and close them down, in the process jobs are lost. As trade unionists, we are trying to

Charles Phahla, a Ceppwawu shopsteward talks to Rugaya Rees about his role in the union movement, inherent problems in the Alliance and the fight against globalisation.

fight globalisation but it is not easy. We always seem to find ourselves one step behind with the bosses two steps ahead.

The issue of labour brokers is also a problem as the labour supplied by them work alongside our members, but remain unrepresented. These workers have no benefits even if they have been working for that company for three or four years. We need an international federation of trade unions which will be able to stop casualisation and this type of nonsense.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) says if you want investment in your country, then these are the type of policies you should be adopting. Even if we have a new government the policies remain the same. This is until, we as Cosatu, say we want socialism so that workers will rule and control the wealth of the country. I can tell you right now that capitalism will fail. Whether we like it or not it is going to fail maybe during our time or not.

Future of the Alliance

I am now talking in my personal capacity and not the views of Ceppwawu. The Alliance was good in the old days. It was good as it led to the eradication of apartheid. It remained relevant. Now it is irrelevant because in a sense you cannot have an Alliance with the ruling party as a trade union movement. I can see the fears of people when we talk about maintaining or breaking the Alliance. Some say break the Alliance but that does not mean a 'no' vote for the African National Congress (ANC). Some workers may be unhappy with the Alliance and this could divide workers as not all workers have the same political tendencies. As a Cosatu affiliate we have to deal with this question and others from members when they see other workers facing job losses as a result of privatisation. Workers ask how we can still be in alliance with the very same government who is now privatising. There are far too many contradictions being in the Alliance. As Cosatu we say no to privatisation and when you speak about the Alliance and privatisation that is a problem. The ANC is clear on privatisation. Public Enterprise minister Jeff Radebe said 'we are going to accelerate privatisation and speed it up' and I have to ask myself where is the Alliance? There is a real crisis here.

It was easy to fight the apartheid government. It was a capitalist government and easy to fight because we did not lose focus, but now there are too many issues. Some only try to protect the Alliance and in the process are losing focus with people on the ground. I can tell you that if there was no Alliance people would not lose focus. We must watch that independent trade unions



do not start up because of different political views amongst members.

Unions delivering

This is difficult but we are trying. Delivery very much depends on the tradition of the union. We are trying to educate shopstewards and thereby ensure members understand issues. Workers are very aware of the provisions in the Labour Relations Act and know if they strike illegally they can then lose their jobs. Interestingly, where we have embarked upon illegal strikes as opposed to the legal route we have benefited more. During illegal strikes top management meets with us soon after the strike has commenced. However, with the legal strikes we can strike for a long time and management will not come and talk to us.'