1 A contested legacy: organisational and political challenges facing COSATU

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In December 2010, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. The union federation used the occasion to remember the numerous struggles that its members and affiliates have fought and the heroic sacrifices that thousands of workers, including its own members, have made to ensure that all workers in South Africa are treated with dignity and that they enjoy better wages and conditions of work. A cursory review of South African union history, particularly of black worker trade unionism, will reveal that the federation had good reason to celebrate because, not only do they have a proud legacy of resistance, but they have also made a sterling contribution to the reconstruction of the country since the end of apartheid.

The familiar pattern of union action in post-liberation societies is that, once the new social order is inaugurated, some unions shift from a resistance posture to one of close cooperation with – and, some would argue, co-option by – the new regime, while others remain in resistance mode and refuse to engage constructively in the new order. A unique aspect of COSATU’s legacy is that the federation has been able to achieve a delicate balance between the themes of resistance and reconstruction by ensuring that engagement in reconstruction processes does not result in a displacement of militant collective action. It is this ability to balance and juggle these apparently contradictory imperatives of resistance and reconstruction that has earned the federation admiration from both friend and foe. Webster and Adler have argued that under apartheid and in the lead-up to the transfer of power to a democratically elected government, labour (specifically COSATU) adopted what they term ‘radical reform’ whereby it:
combined a radical vision of a future society with a reformist, incrementalist strategy ... Through its independent power base it had the capacity both to mobilise and restrain its members, a capacity it used in negotiating with its enemy – both capital and the state – to win and expand legal space in which to pursue its goals. (Webster & Adler 2000: 1–2)

Although the notion of ‘radical reform’ is more appropriate for describing labour’s strategy before the achievement of democracy, there is no doubt that it has continued to shape COSATU’s approach to engagement with the new order in the post-apartheid period. Indeed, ‘radical reform’ is part of the legacy that COSATU continues to embrace today.

However, this legacy of South Africa’s largest union federation is subject to intense contestation by various forces within the federation and its affiliated unions as well as others outside who have an interest in the resolution of the contest (Buhlungu 2003; Von Holdt 2003). While some emphasise the resistance dimension of the legacy in the form of militant action and ‘ungovernability’ to achieve their objectives, there are also those who prioritise engagement in formal institutions of the new democracy and therefore frown upon militant action. This tension is often brought into sharp relief in leadership contests within COSATU and its affiliates, during collective bargaining disputes and strikes and during debates within the Tripartite Alliance, made up of COSATU, the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). However, the clearest evidence of the tension is the way COSATU unions manage (or fail to manage) strikes and the frequency of violent incidents during these strikes. This issue is discussed further in Chapter 9 of this volume.

The contestation over the legacy of the trade union federation has an external as well as an internal dimension. The external contestation of the legacy is by both friends and foes, including COSATU’s allies, opposition parties and observers such as researchers, ‘analysts’ and journalists. For the most part, this contestation is over the kind of influence the federation exerts and the contribution it has made and continues to make in the economy and politics of the country. In this regard, opinions are roughly divided into two positions: those who see the legacy of the federation as positive and progressive and those who regard the federation’s influence as negative and even destructive. For this reason COSATU continues to be in the news and its leaders generate both admiration and reproach.