

Politics drives Sadtu march as officials

jockey for ANC lists

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POLITICS and personal ambition compounded by some sloppy journalism have clouded and confused the issues surrounding the bitter internecine feud within Cosatu and the governing ANC-led alliance. This has also confused the legitimate complaints that teachers have about the state of education in South Africa and the way the system is being administered.

The protest marches in Pretoria and Cape Town, organised this week by the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), are a case in point. The marches tended to focus on demands for the sacking of Basic Education Minister Angie Motshega and her director-general, Bobby Soobrayan.

Yet the core issue that motivated teachers in all the unions to act was the refusal to honour pay agreements struck in 2011. This was a government decision, approved by the cabinet and implemented by Motshega. The agreements, relating to a significant increase in pay for markers of exam papers, were brushed aside on the grounds that there was not enough money.

By reneging on a collective agreement in this way, the whole process of collective negotiation and bargaining was undermined. This unilateral action, as one unionist put it, amounts to "rule by dictatorship". As a result, the combined unions in the sector came together and agreed to take the matter to the Labour Court.

According to the unions, this seemed the best way to establish, once and for all, that it was illegal for agreements reached through established collective bargaining to be ignored. They also feel that without such open – "democratic" – discussion and negotiation, the multitude of problems in the education sector stand little chance of being resolved.

A date was duly set for August since the non-implementation of a 2011 agreement did not qualify as an urgent matter. So it was with some surprise that the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of SA (Naptosa), the National Teachers Union (Natu) and the SA Teachers' Union, still better known by its Afrikaans acronym SAOU, heard about the planned protest marches following on from a go-slow initiated by Sadtu.

They were particularly taken aback when Sadtu protesters delivered a raft of demands, headed by a call to sack Motshega and Soobrayan.

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"While we respect Sadtu's decisions, we certainly don't see it as our prerogative to say who should or should not be a minister," Natu executive director Allen Thomson said.

According to Naptosa president Basil Manuel, what has complicated matters is that there are "personal and political agendas" in play.

Some teachers, across the unions, have noted that, with the 2014 elections looming, some of the agitation within Sadtu may have to do with "the lists", the possible nomination of union members to ANC lists for seats in the provincial and national parliaments.

One of the "Big Five" unions in the country, Sadtu and its leaders can wield considerable influence. And, as some teachers are quick to point out, both Motshega and Public Works Minister Thulas Nxesi are former Sadtu members.

However, the teacher unions all agree that the education system is in crisis, and



Zwelinzima Vavi

Angie Motshega

there seems to be consensus that the problem will not be solved simply by removing the minister and her director-general. There also seems broad agreement that solutions can only be sought through the collective process that the government has undermined.

But, while there was considerable coverage of the Sadtu protests, they are essentially a sideshow to the main battle raging within Cosatu and which also has an impact on the governing alliance.

However, Cosatu president S'dumo Dlamini emphatically denied yesterday that there was a battle within Cosatu or that there was any move to unseat "elected members of the executive".

This amounted to an olive branch being extended to general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, who has been accused by Dlamini and others of various sackable offences. It has also been an open secret since before the Cosatu congress in September last year that a majority group on the federation's executive wanted to get rid of Vavi.

The scheme to dump the general secretary failed when a majority of the

delegates voted to retain him. However, as one Vavi supporter noted at the time: "They lost democratically, but they will get him on the executive, where they have the majority."

"They", in this case, are SACP members of the executive who remain united behind their party's support for President Jacob Zuma. Vavi and his strongest supporter, National Union of Metalworkers of SA general secretary Irvin Jim, are both probably still listed as nominal communist party members.

But both Vavi and Jim have broken ranks with their criticism of various government policies and, in particular, Vavi's support for Cosatu's Corruption Watch initiative, where he is a board member. When two unnamed "sources" were quoted in a weekly newspaper stating that Corruption Watch was investigating Cosatu affiliates, Dlamini quoted the report to accuse Vavi of using the organisation as part of the battle he now denies is under way.

However, there is no investigation into any union by Corruption Watch and Vavi, as a board member, has no say in what

investigations its officers decide on.

"That report did the profession [of journalism] a huge disservice," Vavi said.

But as the battle continues, despite moves by the executive majority to perhaps seek a truce, more such leaks are certain – and may also be published without adequate checks.

"The media will keep doing what they do," Jim said. He and Vavi have suggested that a special congress of elected Cosatu delegates be called to settle matters once and for all.

Dlamini disagrees. He maintains that disputes within Cosatu "must be handled purely internally"; that the elected executive should be allowed to deal with any disputes. This is an argument in support of what the SACP calls democratic centralism and what its critics refer to as centralised or bureaucratic democracy.

Ironically, it is the same argument the government can use to justify such widely unpopular measures as e-tolling.

The difference is that worker-controlled trade unions have the capacity to be more democratic than parliaments.