

# REFLECTIONS ON POSSIBLE STEPS IN PURSUANCE OF WORKER UNITY IN SOUTH AFRICA



**"WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE, YOU HAVE  
NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR CHAINS"**

# Introduction

No one can deny that the existence of 27 federations in our country and more than four hundred unions is not a strength but a major weakness.

This fragmentation of the trade union movement has weakened the voice of organised workers and the working class. There is a long history as to why unity has dodged the South African workers. This includes the way colonialism, capitalism and apartheid affected workers differently, based on their race, country of origin, geographical location within the country, gender, education and age.

The current divisions are to an extent a reflection of the country's history. It is time to confront the historical fault lines through consciously defeating divisions that are based on race, gender, age, geographical locations and education.

Currently workers are under siege from the capitalist system and neoliberal programme that seeks to address the global crisis of capitalism on the back of workers. Not a single one of the current unions and federations acting on their own are capable of reversing this attack on the living standards of the working class.

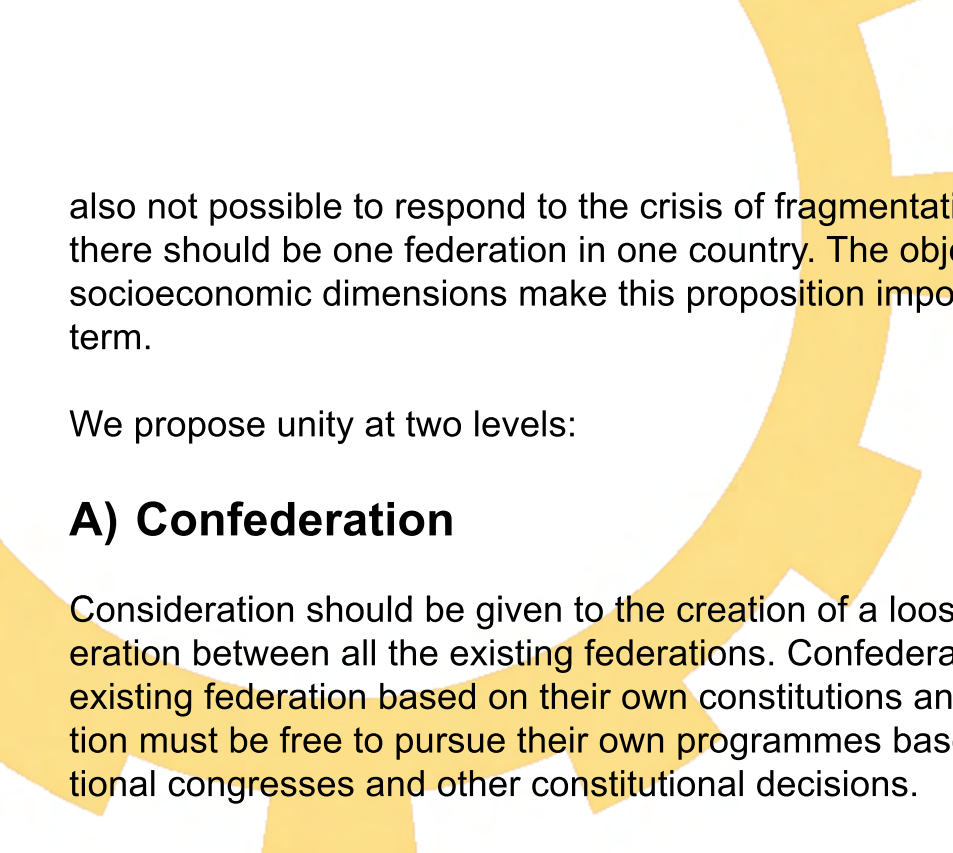
The austerity programme imposed by the government to manage and solve the crisis of capitalism has not only led to government withdrawal from an agreed-to and signed contract with workers. It has also led to massive budget cuts that leave **critical areas** of state services with massive vacancies, chronic shortages of infrastructure, and hence the worsening of living conditions of workers and the working class.

This austerity contributes to the worsening crisis of unemployment, poverty, inequalities, frightening levels of crime and corruption including the legendary mal-governance that has left many believing that our country is on a steady walk towards a failed state.

These factors make the question of how to forge unity of workers as important today, as at any other time in our history.

## Practical steps possible

There is no doubt that calling for “one country – one federation” and “one union – one industry” is necessary but cannot be realised in the short term to the medium future. In fact there is no adherence to “one union – one industry’ in any of the existing federations. It is



also not possible to respond to the crisis of fragmentation by shouting the principle that there should be one federation in one country. The objective and subjective political and socioeconomic dimensions make this proposition impossible in the short to medium term.

We propose unity at two levels:

## **A) Confederation**

Consideration should be given to the creation of a loose but tightly coordinated confederation between all the existing federations. Confederation allows the existence of the existing federation based on their own constitutions and set of leadership. The federation must be free to pursue their own programmes based on the decisions of their national congresses and other constitutional decisions.

However, there are major class battles that should be coordinated at the confederation level. This does not mean that each federation should not respond to these battles in pursuance of their own programmes.

Coordination of major class battles should be based on ensuring unity in action. We sample below areas that the confederation will coordinate:

1. Rejection of austerity programme that undermine state capacity to build a better life for all.
2. Rejection of neoliberalism including privatisation of basic services such as water, municipal services, energy, transport, healthcare, education and security.
3. Fighting for a state capable of providing essential services to the poor and the working class in such areas as healthcare, education, security, justice, etc.
4. Response to the climate change calamity.
5. Response to a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' that threatens to wipe out the gains of industrial employment and to condemn millions to pauper status.
6. Fighting for an economic programme based on minimum demands such as those contained in the employment equity document developed by federations active in NEDLAC at the beginning of the 1994 breakthrough.
7. Based on the above, fighting to ensure that current crises of unemployment, poverty, inequalities and corruption – whose victims are black people, the youth and women – are reversed

## **B) Solidarity between existing unions as we act together in the interests of workers**

- 1) NUM and NUMSA fought together at Eskom in rejection of a wage freeze. Their joint campaign secured a 6 percent that would not be possible without that unity.
- 2) NUMSA, TASWU, DETAWU, and others fought together in the bus strike.
- 3) AMCU and the NUM recently forced the extremely arrogant Sibanye Steelwater to accede to their demands.
- 4) NEHAWU and PSA are fighting together resist a wage freeze at SARS.
- 5) At the Nelson Mandela Metro council, public sector workers in particular are fighting together, against cancellation of the contracts of workers employed during the Covid-19 pandemic and for the insourcing of community healthcare workers.

We argue that the duty of the federations should not be to just coordinate big working-class battles, but also to coordinate unity in action on the ground in shopfloor battles, forging alliances between federation members and unions not affiliated to any of the 27 federations. This we call a confederation of the South African working class.

## **What would the confederation look like?**

We argue against a formal merger or the establishment of bureaucratic structures. We want to create administrative capacity that is sufficient to coordinate but not to take over bureaucratic functions. Such capacity can even be a sole person who is officially jointly employed by the federations, to be at centre of coordination. Such a person should have a small office with one support staff either operating from NEDLAC offices, or a separate office should be created for this purpose.

The duty of this loose structure must be to coordinate and collate information on the areas of cooperation for dissemination to the federation leaderships. Coordination of meetings and enforcing the implementation of the agreed to programmes should be a responsibility of the coordination office. Promoting our work together – between the unions so as to multiply local labour forums (such as in the Nelson Mandela Metro) – should also be coordinated by the office.

With this strategy of confederation, we can move into a new era in which divide-and-conquer politics from above is resoundingly met – and defeated – by unity from below.