**Chapter 6**

**Labour Unions and South Africa’s Foreign Policy: The case of COSATU**

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**Introduction**

This chapter explores the influence of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) on South African foreign policy-making. It uses the federation’s international perspective and various campaigns to discuss COSATU’s impact on the nation’s foreign policy. We have chosen to focus specifically on COSATU because it has explicitly committed itself to working class internationalism, and to taking up struggles for workers’ rights and solidarity on a global scale. We argue that COSATU’s international policy advocacy has produced success in key areas; however, some of the organisation’s proposals have been overlooked as a result of divergent ideological perspectives between COSATU and state officials. These divergent political interests have had a substantial impact on the effectiveness of COSATU’S foreign policy advocacy. Furthermore, we point out that the strength of the federation’s international engagement lies in its ability to make use of diverse forms of advocacy, which fall outside conventional institutions of foreign policy-making. Thus, any analysis of COSATU’s international work transcends the formal elite-driven foreign policy formulation structures. These arguments are advanced through analysis of transnational union organising and solidarity; African political economy; political solidarity; and climate justice. The point of departure is a brief overview of the evolution of COSATU’s internationalism, followed by a framing of the international work of labour unions and how this relates to the global political economy. Thereafter, we review the specific case of COSATU concerning its interventions around African political economy, political solidarity and climate justice.

**COSATU’s internationalism**

COSATU has always placed primacy on internationalism as a core founding principle. This principle is enshrined in the federation’s political ethos and international policy document, and is ‘built on the traditions, struggles and legacies of its predecessors’ (COSATU, 2012b:6).

COSATU’s (2012b:12) international policy defines working class internationalism as follows:

The internationalism we practise is informed by, and resting on, our vision of a world freed from exploitation and oppression. While working class internationalism includes extending international solidarity, it is broader than this; it is about changing the world in a very fundamental way. Our internationalism reaffirms that the interests of the domestic and international working class, despite the uneven development of capitalism, are fundamentally aligned; they are part of the same struggle against one global system. COSATU envisions a culture of internationalism that is politicised and class conscious, democratic, participatory, and worker-controlled. Our internationalism has been termed shop floor internationalism, and is located firmly in the tradition of international social movement unionism.

The solidarity discussed above has not been confined to political struggles on governance or the nature of regimes. Labour internationalism incorporates broader issues within the international political economy, and policy campaigns embedded in the global justice movement (COSATU, 2012b:7). COSATU’s international campaigns strategy covers a wide range of areas, which illustrate the emphasis on an internationalist social movement unionism.[[1]](#footnote-1) These include important topics such as: fair trade; global economic justice; human rights; challenging the power of multinationals; and addressing the global ecological crisis (COSATU, 2014). In other words, the federation’s approach to international work cannot be reduced to factory-based advocacy. It covers a wide range of anti-capitalist struggles that characterise both the historical and contemporary international labour movement.

However, it is important to note that evolving historical contexts shape this internationalism. Each epoch in the evolution of capitalist development has presented peculiar challenges to the labour movement and broader working class. Thus, there are some differences in the internationalist strategies adopted by COSATU during its formative years and the current era. The early practice of internationalism in the federation was largely influenced by the struggle against apartheid capitalism, and the power dynamics of the Cold War. The main objective in this era was to build up support for the anti-apartheid movement, which included direct engagement with foreign unions with shared political principles (COSATU, 2014). This was transformed during the transition to liberal democracy, which coincided with re-integration into the international system governed by principles of globalisation (Buhlungu, 2010:79–80). These principles emphasise international economic integration facilitated by the liberalisation of trade and finance. This ultimately creates conditions conducive for the enhanced mobility of capital and production across the globe.

COSATU’s internationalism was reconfigured to address the challenges presented by the nature of capitalist development in an integrated world. This transformation of the global political economy was not ideologically neutral. It was driven by market-led development philosophy promulgated by large multinational corporations (MNCs) and International Financial Institutions (IFIs). As O’Nyinguro (2005:36) explains: ‘IMF policies tailor the state’s internal politics towards the global liberal-democratic framework that provide the ideological base for the free-market economy’. COSATU’s social movement internationalism developed as a response to the socio-economic and political injustices associated with the establishment of a new form of globalised capitalist political order.

**Transnational union organising and solidarity**

The global labour movement, in recognition of the increasing power of MNCs, has been exploring strategies for organising on a global scale. Trade unions’ international strategy does not focus exclusively on the state, and goes beyond engagement on foreign policy that is focused on traditional state relations.

The move towards neoliberal globalisation has altered the terrain on which trade unions operate. As Munck (2010:220) has argued:

…neoliberal globalisation implied the simultaneous weakening of traditional unionism's century-old national-industrial base, the shift of that base to countries of the South (particularly China), the undermining of traditional job security and union rights, and the decline or disappearance of support from social-democratic parties, social-reformist governments and the most powerful inter-state agencies. Moreover, unions were being confronted with a fact that … in this globalising world of labour, maybe only one worker in 18 was unionised.

To pursue the advancement of workers’ rights, the labour movement must necessarily challenge the power structures of the global political economy. Undoubtedly, confronting the role of MNCs is central in this regard. Developing a global response by labour to global capital presents a range of challenges. First, the labour movement is diverse, made up of workers from the North and South with relatively advantaged and disadvantaged positions in the global economy. Second, trade unions often conceive of themselves in national rather than international (and even less so, global) terms. Trade unions, in many instances, set more store on their relationship with their national state than with their global worker counterparts. Yet, a global response by trade unions is needed. As Bowles (2010:12) argues:

Workers in all parts of the world have seen their working conditions and rewards affected by the forces of globalisation. These changes have been complex, often ambiguous and have had differential impacts leading to new inter- and intra- class frictions and fissures. A coherent response from labour has, not surprisingly, been difficult to formulate either locally, nationally or internationally. Yet the task remains pressing. As global recession’s impacts are felt by workers across the globe, solidaristic responses to globalisation’s dynamics are more important than ever.

Hyman (2011:26) provides a definition of solidarity as emphasising ‘mutuality despite difference’, based on a sense of interdependence and an ‘awareness of common interests’. He concludes that ‘the challenge is to reconceptualise solidarity in ways which encompass the local, the national, [the continental] … and the global. For unions to survive and thrive, the principle of solidarity must not only be redefined and reinvented: workers on the ground must be active participants in this redefinition and reinvention’ (Hyman, 2011:27). The challenge for trade unions, therefore, is to find ways to unite and act globally, while simultaneously acting for workers’ interests at local, national and regional levels. Indeed, for trade unions to exercise power at a global level, they need to be well organised locally.

The strategic choices facing the labour movement are affected by how labour understands globalisation and its impact (Bowles, 2010). But within the global labour movements there are different (and at times contradictory) understandings of globalisation, and what it means for workers, as well as how to respond to it. On the one hand, there are those that see globalisation uncritically, in an approach that Bowles (2010) refers to as ‘classical liberal globalisation’*.* Essentially, this means looking for ‘competitive advantage’; in which workers in different countries compete against each other in the scramble for trade opportunities. Within this approach, there is little or no scope for labour to develop common responses and alternative strategies because ‘labour is conceived in national terms’ (Bowles, 2010:17).

Bowles (2010:17) describes the second paradigm as anti-neoliberal globalisation, which characterises the present era as ‘a global shift in power towards capital and away from labour’. According to this understanding:

Globalisation has effectively empowered multinational corporations in their relations with nation states and labour so that they are able to play off states and workers against each other in their global search for profits. Globalisation… created conditions for global capital accumulation … Labour, in all countries, has been weakened as a result, its bargaining power reduced by mobile transnational capital and compliant national elites (Bowles: 2010:17).

While labour is weakened everywhere, the impact is felt most intensely where labour rights, bargaining power (and labour unions) are weaker. Within this approach, labour must seek alternate ways to pressure transnational capital, through consumer boycotts, corporate codes of conduct, international minimum wage campaigns, global framework agreements, and international labour standards, among others. Most of these strategies are in the realm of regulating global capitalism, although there are some attempts within this paradigm to push for deeper alternatives.

Webster (2015:1) argues that there is a third paradigm emerging which ‘sees labour as an active agent responding to globalisation in innovative ways’. This requires innovative trade union strategies that include: organising new groups of precarious and young workers that are under-represented in trade unions, local and transnational actions, a clear orientation towards social justice in corporate campaigns, and new alliances between labour and community organisations (Kloosterboer, 2007).

Lambert, Webster and Bezuidenhout (2012:294) delineate ‘old’ and ‘new’ sources of workers’ power. ‘Traditional’ forms of workers’ power include structural power (bargaining power derived from workers position in the economy) and associational power (ability to form unions and influence government policy). ‘New’ forms of power include logistical power, where workers can use their location to disrupt the entire economy, for example, through transport and communication. But this is not entirely new; for example, Australian (and other) dockworkers used logistical power when they refused to handle apartheid goods in solidarity with South African workers.

Webster (2015:4) argues that globalisation can offer the possibility for workers to explore a new range of sources and forms of power:

While structural power has been weakened by neoliberal globalisation, and associational power is under attack by the ideologues of the ‘free market’, new sources of power are emerging. One of these is logistical power, a form of structural power where disruptive politics are drawn from the workplace into the public arena (Webster, Lambert and Bezuidenhout, 2008:13).

Another potential source of power is ‘societal power’, where unions campaign in communities, and through alliances, and raise awareness of workers’ struggles as social justice struggles. But this is also not a *new* form of power. There are many instances of community-based struggles and consumer boycotts spearheaded by COSATU in the 1980s, for example. However, new conditions potentially open up new possibilities for exerting these various forms of worker power. This rests on labour’s capacity to advance their struggles in ways that build ‘a counterhegemonic force’ (Webster, 2015:4). This counterhegemonic force is based on ‘cooperative power through coalition-building with social movements’ and ‘discourse power through influencing public discourses around issues of justice’ (Webster, 2015:4). Societal power is a crucial dimension, requiring trade unions to build alliances through community networks and promote mobilisation through consumer boycotts, among others. For instance, South African trade unionists have lobbied (through their global unions) for international boycotts of particular winemakers who flout workers’ rights.

McGuire (2011:14) identifies four broad categories of trade union strategies that have been used to influence international trade processes (which can be generalised to a range of international matters). These include:

* *Formal strategies* that target government and legislation, including participation on social dialogue, legislative lobbying and parliamentary submissions;
* *Awareness raising and diffusion strategies* – this includes monitoring and analysis of trade agreements, education, communication and public campaigns;
* *Networking and coalition building*, using pre-existing national networks and international NGO and union linkages; and
* *Mobilisation through protest and direct action*, such as strikes, protests and rallies.

The South African labour movement has made use of all the above-mentioned strategies at various times. However, there has been a tendency to place primary focus on the national state, through formal processes and, in the case of COSATU, through its alliance with the ANC. Given the neoliberal trajectory of the South African state, this has proven to be a strategy of uneven effectiveness. COSATU’s engagement with government has had some effect, albeit limited, but it has been more effective in its efforts outside of formal engagement.

While COSATU continues to see the importance of engaging the state directly, and through various institutional forums, the federation also recognises the need to complement this with building a range of sources and sites of power, influence and engagement. Labour’s strategy therefore makes use of alternative sources of power (which place social and political pressure on the state and global capital) in addition to traditional sources of power.

Some unions have focused energies on building transnational solidarity through their global unions. They have been actively engaged in building international shop steward forums. For instance, the South African Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), together with UNI (Union Network International) global union, are active in a multinational shop steward forum (known as a Trade Union Alliance) in Shoprite, operating across Africa. This is an important and potentially useful structure, where shop stewards can come together and share information, discuss common problems, compare wages and working conditions, develop strategies and plan solidarity actions. A key objective is to harmonise working conditions for workers from different countries. Trade union alliances negotiate Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) with MNCs, which effectively commit companies to adhere to basic labour standards and codes of practice.

The South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU) and its global union, the International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF), have secured international collective bargaining agreements with ship owners that go beyond the GFAs. Whereas GFAs are based on broad principles and ILO core labour standards, the ITF agreements even cover wages, working conditions, such as hours of work and leave, among others (COSATU, 2014).

The critical challenge facing the South African trade union movement is that the new social movements and alternative forms of action emerging are at the periphery of the traditional labour movement (Webster, 2015:9). The question is whether the global trade union movement can build a new movement linking up with other organisations and social movements, using innovative strategies and alliances to challenge the power of global capital and mobilise around an alternative economic vision. Furthermore, the connections between local and global struggles remain vital: ‘…unions still have to translate a dawning consciousness of the planet’s predicament into a *new kind of movement*, which is global in scope, yet deeply embedded in local place where the meaning of the global is a networked connectivity between these places’ (Cock and Lambert, 2012:8).

**COSATU, the African political economy and the response to the developmental crisis**

Both traditional Marxist and neoMarxist approaches inform COSATU’s perspective on the international political economy. The latter has been particularly salient when discussing the location of Africa in the periphery of the global political economy (Wallerstein, 1974). The federation has drawn from dependency and world systems theories, which locate the region within the international division of labour characterised by asymmetrical power relations.

COSATU has used this ideological approach in its analysis on the state of the African political economy. The federation’s international relations practitioners’ handbook argues that: ‘Africa was drawn into the global capitalist system as a supplier of cheap raw materials and cheap labour for the industrialised countries to develop into what they are now’ (COSATU, 2014:18). The federation points out that this asymmetrical exploitative relationship, brought about through colonisation, has continued in the current era. However, it takes place within a different political milieu governed by a new variant of capitalist development: neoliberalism. This structural shift in the global political economy dates back to the 1970s. It is the product of ‘New Right policy revolutions’ which advocate for the following: free trade, privatisation, market-led development, deregulation, and financial liberalisation (Butler, 2007).

These policy prescripts have produced negative socio-economic consequences in the region (Adedeji, 1999; Mkandawire, 2005). The most vivid are massive job losses, high levels of poverty, increased dependency on donor funding, and deindustrialisation (Eyoh and Sandbrook, 2001; Schneider, 2003). COSATU has highlighted this in various policy documents and policy discussions. More importantly, it has built campaigns on various international anti-capitalist themes with a focus on confronting North-South imbalances in the global economy, and transforming the African political economy. The objective has been to influence post-apartheid South Africa’s approach towards foreign economic policy.

**Fair trade**

COSATU has argued that international trade regimes should be reformed to address the socio-economic challenges in the region. Some of the key proposals include: introducing tariffs to protect strategic industries; enhancing MNC trade regulation; building South-South economic partnerships; increasing export/import quotas to support industrialisation; preferential rights for Less Developed Countries (LDCs); and challenging the policy prescripts and organisational structure of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (COSATU, 2012c; 2014). Another key policy intervention promulgated by the federation is accelerating intra-regional trade. COSATU has remained resolute in its opposition to trade in services. This policy advocacy has taken a variety of forms such as formal policy submissions to government, engagement in alliance structures, and participating in regional multi-stakeholder engagements. Some of COSATU’s engagements, for example through the Trade and Industry chamber at NEDLAC, have yielded successes regarding protection of local industries and jobs. COSATU and its affiliates, representing particular sectors, participate in discussions on the negotiation of trade agreements, and make input on the impact of trade on job creation and working conditions. Trade unions have been able to influence some agreements including, raising objections to trade that may lead to undermining of local manufacturing and jobs. For example, COSATU’s advocacy played a pivotal role in ensuring that the state intervened in the clothing/textiles sector in order to address job losses and deindustrialisation. The automobile sector has also received increased state support (such as incentives and trade policy reforms) as a result of union advocacy. Nevertheless, the state maintains its prerogative to make final decisions (Interview with Tony Ehrenreich, labour convenor for the trade and industry chamber at NEDLAC, Nov 2016).

Other more substantive proposals made by COSATU on trade have been largely overlooked because of the following factors. First, South Africa’s transition took place in an era characterised by the dominance of the global neoliberal development model. The international political economy was structured on the principles of economic liberalism. All parties in the transitional government agreed on the necessity of re-integrating the state into the global political economy. These leaders believed that this could not take place without accepting the international regimes and policy prescripts of IFIs.

The incoming ruling party’s discussion documents concurred with the consensus. The ANC’s *Ready to Govern* document stated that emphasis should be placed on IFI policy recommendations by arguing for: ‘macro-economic balance, including price-stability and balance of payments equilibrium’ (ANC, 1992: 19). This view informed the commitments made by South Africa at the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs, which took place between 1986 and 1994 (Vickers, 2014; Thurlow, 2006). These essentially laid the foundation for the massive tariff reductions that would take place throughout the 1990s and culminated in a 40% tariff line decline by 1999 (Thurlow, 2006:2–3).

Second, the newly formed government (1994) adopted the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) macro-economic policy in 1996. Drafters of the document argued that trade reform was essential for developing a globally competitive economy and attracting the required levels of private sector investment (Hirsch, 2005; Marais, 2011; South Africa, 1996). The measures they proposed were based on the neoclassical approach on trade regulation (Bond, 2000; Terreblanche, 2012). For example, the post-apartheid state engaged in substantial tariff reduction far beyond what the IFIs required in the early 1990s (Vickers, 2014). As Vickers explains (2014:60):

The second lever for encouraging greater liberalisation was unilateral tariff reform under the liberal supervision of the country's first post-apartheid trade minister, Trevor Manuel. This unilateral reform programme saw the government cut tariff protection for industry, including the sensitive clothing, textiles and auto sectors, at a faster rate and ahead of the country's mandatory requirements under the newly established WTO.

Trade unions such as SACTWU (Southern African Clothing and Textile Workers Union) tried to stem the tide of job shedding through campaigns, lobbying and negotiations. However, 91 000 workers lost their jobs between 2005 and 2014 (SACTWU, 2015). In 2015 SACTWU welcomed the 3 per cent increase in employment in the clothing, textiles, leather and footwear industry, attributing this to: ‘continued strong support for our industry from national government since 2009, coupled with our trade union’s aggressive “Save Jobs” campaign’ (SACTWU Press statement, December 2015). Partly as a result of SACTWU lobbying, government invested R3.5 billion to stabilise the sector and save 65 000 jobs.

Third, the signing of bilateral trade agreements such as the Trade Development and Cooperation Agreements (TDCA: EU), and Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA: US) since 2000 also ran counter to COSATU’s perspective on trade. Both these treaties have been heavily criticised for maintaining unequal North-South trade relations, and undermining efforts to resolve pertinent socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, poverty and inequality. COSATU’s 2012 congress report points out that the TDCA has hampered value addition and industrialisation. This agreement prohibits the state from introducing export taxes on some raw materials, which can “ensure value additions to commodities and diversify export production” (COSATU 2012c:44). The federation proposes that “bilateral agreements such as the TDCA these should be renegotiated” in order to facilitate the extension of exports quotas on all raw materials. Walaza (2014:23–24) supports COSATU’S position, arguing that the TDCA impedes the state from using policy mechanisms such as import or export quotas to support local manufacturing and value addition.

The federation has also challenged AGOA’s conditionalities, which encourage signatories to accelerate privatisation, financial deregulation and minimise state efforts to support localisation and industrialisation (Bond, 2004:60). COSATU echoed these views in a recent national policy debate on the renewal of AGOA. The organisation’s statement argued that: ‘The US has continued to maintain non-tariff barriers on AGOA imports with the result that many AGOA countries continue to export a few products and mainly in the energy sector’ (COSATU 2015). Furthermore, the American government was accused of using ‘AGOA to extract concessions and bully SA into agreeing to further liberalise her market, and this is unfortunate as AGOA is meant to be a non-reciprocal agreement, which does not require eligible countries to liberalise their trade’ (COSATU 2015).

However, COSATU has managed to achieve some objectives of its trade policy campaigns. The most prominent gain was the introduction of the Trade Policy and Strategy Framework (TPSF) in 2010. This piece of legislation compels the government to consider a number of socio-economic impacts before renewing or establishing trade agreements. According to COSATU (2012: 45), the TPSF is different from previous policy, because it places the creation of decent employment at the centre of trade negotiations. The federation views this as a shift from orthodox economic prescripts, which reduce trade policy discourses to attracting foreign direct investment and competitiveness.

COSATU’s proposal of transforming and democratising the WTO has gained legitimacy among other policy actors. South African government representatives have raised this point in a number of international trade forums (Mufamadi, 2007:12). Another achievement has been the insertion of policy measures to address some concerns raised by COSATU and other unions in the Southern African Trade Union Council regarding the EU/SADC Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) over the past couple of years. The federation and other commentators have argued that EPAs undermine efforts aimed at building African economic integration and intra-regional trade (Adogamhe, 2008; Commission for Africa 2010; Mabasa, 2011). Moreover, the federation has criticised the investment clauses of EPAs and their subversion of labour rights. The other key area of contention has been the continued EU agricultural subsidies while advocating for less state support for producers in SADC countries.

The above-mentioned concerns have been partially addressed in the EPA signed in June 2016. For example, it states that: ‘The participants of the SADC EPA confirm that any new or modified legislation on labour conditions or environmental practices that they may adopt will follow internationally recognised standards. It means also that they cannot weaken labour or environmental protection to encourage trade or investment’ (EU, 2016). This agreement contains other clauses that partially alleviate the criticisms on agricultural policy and regional integration (EU, 2016). However, the document is silent on introducing mechanisms to support implementation and enforcement. COSATU has continued to express concerns about a range of shortcomings of the EPA. The EPA does not address some pertinent contentious issues such as the use of intellectual property rights in key areas of social development such as health. Moreover, the document explicitly supports existing WTO trading regimes and accelerating liberalisation, which exacerbates unemployment and the decline of local industries. The African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa) to which COSATU is affiliated, released a statement on EPAs arguing that ‘the agreements seem designed to completely remove whatever leverage remains for Africa to transform its economies’ and calling on governments not to sign the EPAs as currently structured (ITUC-Africa, 2016).

COSATU has also been a strong advocate for advancing the agenda to diversify South Africa’s trade portfolio. The over-reliance on traditional trade partners such as the EU and US has been heavily criticised and a call has been made to deepen trade relations with other regions in the global South, especially Latin America and Asia. This has coincided with a proposal for building global South alliances in trade negotiations (COSATU, 2012b:34–35). Former president Thabo Mbeki and other state trade representatives have supported the federation’s view on this matter (Mbeki, 2007:7).

The formation of the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) Forum in 2003, and South Africa joining the Brazil, Russia, India, China (BRIC) group in 2010 to form BRICS, illustrates this commitment. Indeed COSATU played an active role in the BRICS trade union forum. The declaration of the second BRICS trade union forum, held in Durban in 2013, stated that ‘the emergence of BRICS presents the potential to organise a progressive force around which various struggles can be coordinated. However, we continue to call for a further decisive shift in the current political and economic outlook of BRICS’ (COSATU, 2013). These South-South platforms are supported by memorandums of understanding on key areas such as trade, and more recently, the establishment of institutional infrastructure to support common objectives (IBSA, 2006; BRICS, 2015). The convergence between COSATU and government on strengthening South-South trade relations continues in the Zuma-led administration.

However, this consensus is also laden with contradictions. The state trade representatives mainly focus on attracting foreign investment and establishing trade networks with countries in the global South. They pay minimal attention to the negative effects that both trade and investment have on workers’ rights, employment security and livelihoods. Moreover, government’s approach on the enhancement of global South trade relations does not seek to alter the fundamental trading principles of a global capitalist political economy. COSATU has raised concerns regarding these contradictions.

**Alternative African development models**

COSATU’s international policy document emphasises creating alternative development paradigms on the continent. The federation states that the region should implement strategies centred on human development, socio-economic redistribution, industrialisation, social forms of economic ownership and regional integration (COSATU 2012b:38). This policy position explicitly criticises the conventional neoliberal development strategy, and questions the fundamental principles of economic liberalism. COSATU’s criticism of regional developmental strategies must be understood within this theoretical and ideological context.

This specifically applies to the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) –spearheaded by the South African government in the late 1990s – and adopted by the AU in Lusaka, 2001. The main policy objective of NEPAD is to: ‘change the unequal relationship between Africa and the developed world’ (NEPAD, 2001). There is convergence on this broad aim. However, COSATU has historically disagreed with some of the policy instruments suggested to achieve this objective. The following sections will unpack some of the main concerns raised by COSATU regarding NEPAD.

COSATU and other civil society groups argue that NEPAD was not formulated in a democratic manner. The federation criticised the process of developing this programme on the grounds of a lack of transparency and participation. Only select groups were consulted and the broader African citizenry was excluded from these discussions. Representatives of the World Bank, G8 country leaders and the leadership of multinational corporations were involved in the stakeholder discussion on NEPAD (COSATU, 2002; Bond, 2004). According to COSATU, this contradicted the fundamental principle of democratic foreign policy-making. Moreover, it subverted the principle of people-driven development enshrined in the NEPAD framework document (COSATU, 2002).

The federation also raised criticism about the political economy interventions proposed by NEPAD. COSATU argued that the proposals were not suitable for addressing the developmental challenges on the continent, because they were similar to the policy prescripts of the IFIs, which have produced negative socio-economic outcomes in the region (Adedeji, 1999; COSATU, 2002; Mkandawire, 2005). This critique was motivated by NEPAD’s position on trade liberalisation; emphasis on private sector driven growth; a liberal approach to macroeconomic stability; and uncritical integration into the international political economy. The federation and other critics challenged the emphasis on accelerating African integration into the global political economy, without sufficiently dealing with the fundamental causes of asymmetrical power relations in key areas such as global trade (COSATU 2002; Bond 2004). In sum, the assumption that enhanced integration was the panacea for development was questioned.

COSATU also highlighted NEPAD’s failure to address labour market and employment creation issues sufficiently. The priority was placed on good governance, debt relief, enhanced integration into the global political economy and investment. According to COSATU (2002), this was a major omission because ‘NEPAD must open the door to a universal application of core labour standards in Africa’. The federation argued that this shortcoming was prevalent in most continental development strategies. These documents primarily focus on macroeconomic stability, attracting large volumes of FDI, and trade liberalisation. The discourse on labour market policy and creation of decent employment is always drafted as a secondary or peripheral issue. Furthermore, COSATU stated that NEPAD minimised the role of the African state in the political economy. This was perceived as an impediment to economic development, especially in the context of attempts to accelerate industrialisation across the continent.

Nonetheless, COSATU supported the pillars of the programme that advocated for promoting good governance and people-centred development. The federation illustrated this commitment by participating and providing inputs in the South African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) process. COSATU’s submission primarily focused on socio-economic development and argued that: ‘Government must begin a broad consultative process to identify a growth path that is developmental and pro-poor, rather than focusing on supporting the current path that fails to benefit the majority of South Africans’ (COSATU, 2006:28).

The discussion above indicates that COSATU has had some influence in the debate on regional developmental strategies. Robust engagement on NEPAD proposals and participation in the APRM process illustrate this. However, the points raised by the federation regarding alternative African development paradigms and policy prescripts were largely ignored by policy-makers. Public officials focused on the developmental paradigm supported by IFIs and emphasised locating NEPAD within this neoliberal framework. Moreover, the criticisms on transparency and exclusive participation in the formulation process raise deeper concerns about trade union participation in foreign policy-making. COSATU raised similar concerns about the lack of consultation in the EPA process. This was captured in the European Commission’s report on EPA stakeholder perspectives (EU, 2014).

COSATU, as part of the Southern Africa Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC) has played an active role in attempting to create a common regional platform on a range of socio-economic issues. This includes supporting minimum wage campaigns in each country, advancing the demand for cross-border comprehensive social security, and confronting poverty and job losses (Interview with Bongani Masuku, COSATU International Secretary, November 2016).

**COSATU and the just transition**

COSATU’s perspective on the global ecological crisis has primarily focused on climate justice. The federation has taken a number of resolutions that cover the following pertinent areas: climate change, energy democracy and sustainable development. Various congresses have deliberated on these key issues, and resolved to address them within broader advocacy on restructuring the political economy. This is expressed in COSATU’s*Growth Path towards Full Employment* (2010),which argues that:

Economic growth and development must support sustainable environments. Industrial and social processes must minimise the disruption of natural processes; limit environmental degradation, adverse changes in bio-diversity, soil erosion and desertification, the emission of greenhouse gases, especially carbon dioxide, and pollution of water streams and ground water. Patterns of consumption must also be aligned towards products that optimise environmental regeneration**.**

The federation’s approach on the ecological crisis is also influenced by the principle of internationalism discussed in previous sections. COSATU has participated in a number of international policy debates on the climate and ecological crisis. More importantly, the organisation has played a role in shaping the state’s position in international climate change negotiations. The following section briefly explores the nature and effect of this foreign policy-making engagement.

*COSATU and international climate justice*

The federation has presented a number of arguments in its submissions on the global climate policy discourse. These have been tabled in three main forums: COSATU multi-stakeholder policy workshops, government tripartite discussion forums and national climate change conferences. All these engagements have been guided by a number of central pillars that characterise COSATU’s international climate justice work.

The first one is based on the principle of a just transition to a low-carbon economy. This concept emphasises providing sufficient support for workers who will be threatened as a result of diversifying away from fossil fuels. Measures such as the provision of high quality reskilling or training for participation in other sectors must be introduced. More importantly, sustainable economic restructuring must not lead to workers experiencing pay cuts or decreases in social wages (COSATU 2011). The principle also highlights the potential for massive job creation in the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The second proposal of COSATU at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiations is centred on the notion of common but differentiated responsibilities. Developed nations’ commitments on emission reduction targets should definitely exceed those of the less developed countries, since they are the biggest emitters. This means transcending the 25-40 per cent range (compared to 1990 levels), crucial for achieving a reduction rate of 72 per cent by 2050. South African government representatives at the UNFCCC meetings have articulated this position, and formed alliances with other developing countries to advance this argument. Civil society and trade union organisations such as COSATU have played an integral role in influencing public officials to support this principle.

The third area that the federation emphasises in international negotiations concerns finance. COSATU has always argued that highly industrialised nations should make larger contributions towards mitigation and adaptation interventions. This view is informed by the fact that these countries have benefited the most from the extractive developmental paradigm that characterised previous epochs. The government of South Africa shares this perspective and has articulated this on a number of occasions. Representatives concur that the Green Fund should be capitalised by developed countries, with clear commitments on how much they will contribute; implementation time lines; the nature of the finance; and how it will be distributed.

However, there is also some policy divergence between government and COSATU on international climate change policy issues. This includes the use of market mechanisms to address the global climate crisis, such as carbon trading and offsets. The federation argues that these solutions commodify the global commons, environment and nature. Moreover, large enterprises have manipulated market mechanisms in order to produce more emissions, and obtain large amounts of profit from the capitalist green economy.

There has also been contestation over possible mitigation strategies. COSATU rejects the introduction of large-scale energy solutions, which are presented as alternatives to fossil fuels. Prime examples are hydraulic fracturing (or fracking) and nuclear technologies presented as mitigation intervention by the South African government. COSATU has used platforms like the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy international alliance to mobilise support for the federation’s position. The main objective has been to engage in collective policy advocacy, and place pressure on governments all over the globe to review their energy strategies. This has yielded some results in other countries; but not in South Africa.

The last contentious area is the different perspectives on the structural causes of the global climate crisis. COSATU’s framework clearly identifies capitalism as the primary cause of climate change. This economic system is based on the super-exploitation of labour and the earth’s natural resources (COSATU, 2011). The UNFCCC operates within the confines of this economic model. It does not attempt to review the expansionist logic of capitalism, and the externalities it produces. In other words, the UNFCCC is centred on the notion of greening capitalism rather than advancing alternatives. The South African government supports the UNFCCC’s broad objective of developing an ecologically sustainable global capitalist model. The state has not raised any interventions that seek to alter the fundamental logic of global capitalism. This position is different from COSATU’s perspective, which is based on creating an eco-socialist society.

The discussion above illustrates that COSATU’s policy advocacy on climate change foreign policy has had some successes. The federation has used various forums to engage government on UNFCCC related issues. This has resulted in the development of consensus on some arguments presented at various international climate change discussions. However, COSATU has not managed to influence the government’s position on market mechanisms and the use of large-scale energy mitigation strategies such as nuclear. More importantly, the two policy actors differ on the ideal alternative macro-developmental model.

**COSATU’s political solidarity campaigns**

The role of organised labour in South Africa concerning foreign policy straddles two complementary and, at times, contrasting approaches. The trade union movement (specifically COSATU and its affiliates) focuses both on engagement with the South African state, its policy and practice; and also simultaneously on building a global movement against oppression, capitalist exploitation and imperialism.

COSATU’s engagement with the South African state is an important yet limited part of its international strategy, given that the South African state is itself in a contradictory position. This is because the ruling party has committed itself to challenging and transforming the existing global system of power dominated by the North, yet at the same time the South African state has been integrated into this global system. According to Habib (2009:143) South African foreign policy cannot be understood outside of the post-apartheid transition which ‘occurred when a particular configuration of power prevailed in the global order that not only established the parameters which governed its evolution, but also determined which interests prevailed within it’.

This position is further elaborated in the following quotation from Lipton (2009), who argues that South Africa has adopted a hard realist policy, including the full ‘neoliberal’ package, both domestically and in its international economic policies where, instead of working for ‘radical transformation of the system’, it continues to work within, and thus strengthens, this system.

For the labour movement, building a global presence that challenges the existing global political economy is crucial, given its long-term vision of building an alternative to capitalism.

One of the ways in which COSATU has exercised its own independent political role internationally is through its solidarity campaigns with other labour and social movements that it considers its political allies, which are currently facing various forms of political repression, economic hardship and human rights abuses. Here COSATU has prioritised solidarity campaigns with the people of Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Western Sahara, Palestine and Cuba. COSATU’s main focus and strength in its international work is on political solidarity campaigns, which the federation views as integrally linked to its overall strategy: ‘struggles for democracy, human rights and working class power in various countries are… connected to the struggle against imperialism, poverty and underdevelopment’ (COSATU International Policy, 2012).

There is general convergence between COSATU and the ANC on support for the liberation movements and self-determination struggles of historical allies, such as Palestine, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Cuba. However, COSATU in its expression of social movement unionism tends to adopt bolder stances and more radical tactics than that of the ANC, and even more so than the South African state. In some instances, this has enabled COSATU to play an important role in influencing South African foreign policy, and in other instances (as in the case that follows) COSATU has pursued action independently of the state.

*International solidarity action: The case of Zimbabwe*

In this section, we review a particular case of international solidarity action which is illustrative of what the trade union movement is able to achieve through the social campaigning and mobilisation of workers. Through the Zimbabwe arms shipment campaign, COSATU was able to impact through its own decisive action where the South African state failed to act. In this instance, COSATU had been unsuccessful in formal attempts to influence the state to act more resolutely in relation to Zimbabwe; however, it achieved its aims independently of the state.

In April 2008, a COSATU affiliate, SATAWU made global headlines when its members refused to offload Chinese arms shipments destined for the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe.[[2]](#footnote-2) SATAWU workers were acting in solidarity with workers in Zimbabwe, and in response to preceding events where Zanu-PF was defeated in elections, but the result was nullified and a campaign of violence was unleashed by Zanu-PF against the political opposition.

Not long after this, a ship named the An Yue Jiang (owned by the state-owned Chinese shipping giant COSCO) docked in Durban carrying arms and ammunition destined for Zimbabwe. The ITF (of which SATAWU is a member) has inspectors along the coastline and at docks around the world. They informed SATAWU workers, who then refused to offload the shipment. By taking action, they made it clear that they would have no part in the repression of the working class in Zimbabwe.

Contrastingly, the position of the South African government was that there was nothing they could do, and that it was a legal transfer of cargo. The deputy minister of Foreign Affairs claimed that they had no knowledge of the arms prior to it being exposed in the media (Pahad, 2009). However, the National Arms Control Committee had issued a permit authorising that the weapons could be transferred through South Africa to Zimbabwe (Fritz, 2009). SATAWU remained steadfast and issued a statement stating that: ‘SATAWU does not agree with the position of the South African government not to intervene with this shipment of weapons. Our members employed at Durban Container Terminal will not unload this cargo and neither will any of our members in the truck-driving sector move this cargo by road’ (*news24.com*, 2008).

SATAWU dockworkers’ action led to global public outcry from global trade unions, NGOs, human rights groups, and the media. The solidarity action was supported by legal and social movement networks in South Africa, which instituted a legal process to prevent the transfer of weapons. Before a court order had even been issued, the ship had set sail for Maputo, Mozambique. In anticipation of this, the ITF and SATAWU dockworkers mobilised their networks in Mozambique. The Mozambican transport workers also refused to offload the shipments. Workers in Namibia and Angola followed suit, supported by church, legal and civil society organisations.

COSATU summed up the victory of this campaign as follows in its *International Practitioners Resource Book* (2014:75): ‘In testimony of worker muscle and the power of international solidarity and collective action, the An Yue Jiang was eventually turned back to China. The shipments never made their way into Zimbabwe – despite the claims by the defeated and humiliated Zimbabwean government otherwise’.

This is an important example of international solidarity, because ordinary workers, linked with one another across borders, were able to make a real difference. It did not involve high level delegations, expensive conferences or fancy events – just workers using the power that they derive from their position in the global economy to help each other out.

COSATU has also played an important role in highlighting the plight of the working class people of Palestine, Swaziland and Western Sahara, among others. COSATU convenes the SATUCC Strategic Solidarity Campaign to facilitate solidarity support within Southern Africa and monitoring ILO conventions on trade union rights (Interview with Bongani Masuku, COSATU International Secretary, November 2016).

The federation has been very vocal and active in its solidarity campaigns with Palestine. This is an area of convergence between COSATU and South Africa’s foreign policy. COSATU gives expression to this solidarity through protest marches, lobbying and advocacy, and as an active part of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign (BDS) which organises boycott campaigns to place political and economic pressure on Israel to grant equal rights to Palestinians. The BDS campaign has pressured large multinational corporations to terminate business relations with the state of Israel. For instance G4S Security Services recently announced the termination of its contract to provide security in Israeli prisons, following pressure from BDS (Apps, 2016). SAMWU and NEHAWU (National Health Education & Allied Workers Union) have campaigned for the termination of relationships between Israeli and South African municipalities and universities. In January 2009, SATAWU dockworkers refused to unload a ship with Israeli cargo in Durban.

Similarly, COSATU and its affiliates have taken up the struggle against the Swazi state with border protests, marches to the embassy and a cultural boycott, among others. The federation has devoted significant time and energy to support its Swazi trade union counterparts, including in the process of building trade union capacity and worker unity. A number of COSATU affiliates in the public and private sectors have sent trade union organisers to work with and support Swazi trade unionists. The COSATU affiliate in the entertainment industry, Cultural Workers Union of South Africa (CWUSA), has been an active player, alongside COSATU and the Swaziland Solidarity Network in driving the cultural boycott. While these actions do not engage directly with South African foreign policy, they contribute to raising public awareness, and thus put political pressure on the Swazi state.

The above-mentioned political solidarity campaigns demonstrate how, with its social power and influence, COSATU has been able to put pressure on repressive states where the South African state with its quiet diplomacy has failed to have the same effect. The extent to which COSATU and other labour federations, are independent of the state, is the extent to which they are able to play this role most effectively. There is a danger that the political alliance between the ANC, COSATU and the SACP may have the effect of dampening COSATU’s activism, rather than radicalising the ANC and pushing the state to take more decisive action.

In addition, it is important to note that it is largely the economic interests of the elite that drive foreign policy (often in invisible ways), rather than political considerations of the ANC, its supporters, and the people of South Africa in general. As McKinley (2004:357) argues:

South Africa's foreign policy towards Zimbabwe has been, and continues to be, driven by the combined, and in this case complementary, class interests of South Africa’s emergent black and traditional (white) bourgeoisie (whether located in the public and/or private sectors). Put another way, South African policy can best be understood, and explained, by critical reference to the political economy of a renewed South African sub-imperialism.

McKinley elaborates this argument with reference to the economic ‘rescue package’ of close to R1 billion for the Mugabe regime. The motivation for the ‘rescue package’ was to halt the decline of the Zimbabwean economy in the interests of the Southern African region. However, McKinley (2004:359) argues that:

… upon a closer inspection of the targets of the “rescue package” it becomes clear that the real beneficiaries of this evidently neighbourly philanthropy are South African government parastatals (all of which are now either partially privatised and/or corporatised) and government-controlled financial institutions. At that time, the Zimbabwean electricity and oil parastatals were owing ESKOM and SASOL (the South African parastatal counterparts in electricity and oil) millions of Rands.

This demonstrates that there is an even greater need for independent political action and mobilisation by the labour movement to achieve its aims outside of the state, where necessary. It remains important for the labour movement to continue its efforts to influence and lobby the state on various aspects of foreign policy. This can be pursued through various means – ideally in combination – from the boardroom to the factory floor, to the streets and communities.

**Conclusion**

Traditional international relations theory has been dominated by state centrism and the focus on formal multilateral institutions. The various schools of thought in the discipline have analysed the system using states and international organisations as primary units of analysis. However, the emergence of international political economy and critical theorists has challenged this perspective. These alternative voices have highlighted the participation of non-state actors in foreign policy-making. This chapter drew from these contributions and focused on COSATU’s role as a labour union in shaping post-apartheid foreign policy decision-making. It highlighted both the successes and limitations of the federation’s national and international advocacy. These were related to deeper ideological and political contradictions. More importantly, the chapter pointed out that international policy advocacy should not be reduced to formal elite-driven structures. COSATU and the global labour movements continue to play a significant role in raising the voice of workers, and building a global movement for change.

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1. This term describes trade union activism that addresses socioeconomic and political issues beyond the workplace or factory floor: trade union practice embedded in broader societal and community struggles. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The account of this campaign is based on interviews conducted by NALEDI with COSATU and SATAWU, and presented as a case study in the COSATU International Practitioners Resource Book (2014:74-75). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)