



Navigating complexities of labour relations under Government of National Unity

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The relationship between unions and employers is, naturally, fraught with tensions and contradictions. This is because generally the history of mankind, especially and in particular, the history of labour, is a history of class struggles. The power dynamics between the employer and the employee places them at the centre of these contradictions. This applies in the private and public sectors. Whether a government is a coalition or a one-party state does not matter, such contradictions and tensions are bound to happen.

Colonialism and apartheid were the surrogates of an exploitative labour system. During that era labour relations were characterised by strife and struggle. Organised labour was essentially confronted with an exploitative labour system on the shop floor and an oppressive regime in the streets. It is not surprising, therefore, that during this era, labour relations were generally hostile.

Post 1994, the evolution of labour relations in the public service in South Africa tells a different story. A democratic system created fertile ground for harmonious relations. The new dispensation saw a slew of progressive labour policies and legislation come through. The *Labour Relations Act* of 1995, the *Basic Conditions of Employment Act* of 1997, the *Employment Equity Act* of 1998, and the *Affirmative Action Act* of 1998 were the building blocks of a progressive legislative framework that defined labour relations in South Africa.

Meanwhile, labour generally adopted a CC – cooperative and contradictory – posture towards government. Some unions and federations went overboard, ingratiating themselves and getting co-opted into government. Whilst rubbing shoulders in the corridors of power looked fashionable, it compromised the interests of workers. Having put some of the trade-union leaders into its pocket, the governing party went ahead implementing neo-liberal policies that opened flood gates for privatisation of public services, casualisation of work, and labour brokers. Workers were the biggest losers, and the employer had achieved its agenda – advancing its interests at the expense of workers. This served to confirm that it is not in the best interest of a union to have a cozy relationship with an employer. In the end, the PSA was vindicated for its stance to keep an arm's length relationship with the employer, adopting a neutral posture, and not trust the employer simply because of the democratic dispensation.

How, then, should the PSA and other unions in the public sector interface with the new government of national unity (GNU)? Put differently, what should be the posture of the PSA towards the GNU? Drawing lessons from the previous experience, one thing is clear though: The PSA must not be gullible and must remain steadfast and vigilant in defense of the rights of workers in general and the Union's members in particular. The GNU concept is neither new nor unique to South Africa and we must refer back to learn from that experience.

Historical context

The democratic dispensation of 1994 ushered in a GNU with the view of uniting a nation that was divided along racial lines. It was a society that suffered under the weight of an evil apartheid system that was declared a heinous crime against humanity by the United Nations. The founding fathers of the nation saw it fit to structure a framework that would see all sections of society participate in the political system in the process of rebuilding and reconstruction a new rainbow nation. A GNU was thus conceived and actioned under an interim constitution that made provision for two deputy presidents. Although the African National Congress (ANC) had won the majority vote, it sought the participation of the National Party into government with former President, FW De Klerk assuming the position of a deputy president alongside the ANC's Thabo Mbeki. With President Nelson Mandela at the helm, the hope for national unity and reconciliation became a real possibility. The GNU was a mechanism conceived to facilitate the transition of society from apartheid to democracy.

It is important to note that during this time – 1994 to 1996 – public-sector unions played a crucial role in this process, advocating for workers' rights and better working conditions. The euphoria of democracy also stimulated the growth of unionism in the public sector as the then GNU gave recognition to unions such as Nehawu, Samwu and others. This in return allowed unions the space to exert influence in policy and legislation with the public service.

However, it was at macro-economic policy level where the influence and the voice of unions were ignored. The adoption of the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) policy in 1996 led to frosty relations and tensions between the GNU and public-sector unions. Unions believed GEAR would lead to job losses and privatisation and government believed it would stimulate economic growth. There was also talk about and attempts to restructure and rationalise various government departments and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) that left many unions, especially the PSA gob smacked. Public-sector unions resisted these attempts to reduce the workforce, privatise services, and introduce performance-based contracts. These efforts were not always successful as along the way some struggles were won and some were lost. The reality of this experience is that it was during the GNU that policy-related tensions emerged and animated the nature of labour relations, making it clear that the employer will always seek to advance its interest whether under a coalition, GNU or a one-party state.

Public-sector wage disputes also shaped the nature of labour relations. The policy of inflation targeting did not succeed in lowering the cost of living. Many public servants could no longer cope with rising inflation. Education, housing, and transport costs became unaffordable with children of public servants being the majority of those who constitute the missing middle who are too rich to meet the National Education Student Financial Aid Scheme threshold but too poor to afford the cost of higher education. Gentrification by municipalities left many workers homeless as they could no longer afford the property rates and could not meet the eligibility criteria set by banks. Demands for better wages and salary increases sometimes fell on deaf ears. Unions were forced to resort to industrial action and some of these were prolonged and a few regrettably turned violent. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic made things worse, exacerbating tensions with the labour movement demanding better working conditions and protective equipment.

Although the GNU of 1994 collapsed with the resignation of FW De Klerk from government, the ANC carried on with the policies introduced during the GNU. One of the sore points that led to frosty labour relations was the weak regulatory framework that facilitated casualisation of labour and the mushrooming of labour brokers. The high unemployment rate left many job seekers vulnerable, accepting precarious work and unfavourable working conditions. Workers were exploited and subjected to short-term contract work without benefits. Labour brokers were flourishing in the private sector and found a perfect ground in SOEs and some government departments. These parasites – middlemen – thrived and sustained themselves on the sweat of workers.

The fact that all of these happened in the democratic dispensation, under the GNU and a largely progressive government, suggests that we must never let our guard down. We must always be vigilant irrespective of who is occupying the seat of government. The nature of the relationship between the employer and employee will always be interest-based. When our interests are common and we stand to derive mutual benefit, we will cooperate, and this is a rare occurrence. When our interests are conflicting, which will be more often than not, we must stand firm to safeguard the benefits of members.

2024 GNU: Current situation

The national elections of 29 May 2024 did not give one party a majority to govern South Africa. Political parties were forced to negotiate a coalition arrangement to co-govern. The ANC, as the incumbent that lost an election but the largest party electorally, took it upon itself to invite other political parties to constitute a government. Thus, the idea of a GNU was hatched, and a statement of intent was drafted and signed by ten political parties that then constituted a government. The conditions under which a GNU was formed in 2024 are completely different from those that preceded the formation of the GNU in 1994. Whilst the previous GNU was predicated upon the idea of building national unity after years of subjugation of one race by another, the current GNU was a perfect excuse by the ANC to hold on to power after it lost an election. If anything, the current government is a broad coalition led by the two parties, the ANC and the Democratic Alliance (DA). As reality would, within the shortest period, prove, when these two elephants – the ANC and the DA – fight, it is the grass – the working class – that would suffer.

Meanwhile, parties to the agreement pledged to uphold the values of social justice, redress, and equity, which aligns with the interests of public-sector unions. However, the current GNU has had a complex relationship with public-sector unions in South Africa. Tensions have arisen regarding issues such as privatisation, with unions expressing concerns that the GNU's policies may lead to job losses and compromised service delivery.

Some of the areas of serious contention so far includes the National Health Insurance (NHI), which the President assented upon making it law following its adoption by parliament in June 2023. The PSA has been vocal about its support for universal health coverage, which the NHI proclaims as its objective. However, the PSA has also sharply raised concerns regarding the right of the Union's members to choose their doctors and the facilities they would like to be treated by and from when they are sick. The PSA has called upon government to prioritise the improvement of the conditions of public healthcare facilities, the provision of medical supplies, and employment conditions of healthcare workers. The success of the NHI cannot be guaranteed if the situation of health facilities is allowed to deteriorate.

The stalemate in the GNU on the national budget that led to the postponement of the presentation of the budget in February 2025 suggested that the GNU was unstable and was teetering on the brink of collapse. The PSA, and taking it queue from the Federation of Unions of South Africa, supported the postponement of the budget.

It was the collective view that the postponement would allow for broader consultation and consensus. Together with other unions, the PSA shared its concerns regarding the suggested VAT increase that would directly impact the already depleted pockets of workers.

What is to be done?

It is safe to suggest that the relationship between public-sector unions and the current GNU in South Africa is complex and multifaceted. As the GNU navigates the country's socio-economic challenges, public-sector unions have to carefully consider their approach to ensure they protect the interests of their members whilst contributing to the country's development.

As one of the largest unions in the public sector, the PSA must consider its posture towards the GNU, and frame its relationship and interactions based on the imperative to protect the interests of its members. A cooperative yet critical approach towards the GNU will allow the PSA to engage constructively with government whilst maintaining independence and the ability to advocate for members' interests. The significant role played by unions in supporting government's efforts to deliver quality public services, which are critical to addressing the challenges of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, cannot be understated. By working together, the PSA and government can identify areas of common interest and develop solutions that benefit the public-sector workforce and the broader population. However, cooperation should not come at the expense of critical engagement. The PSA has a responsibility to hold government accountable for its policies and actions, particularly when these impact negatively on the Union's members. Unions must be vigilant in monitoring government's decisions and be prepared to challenge these when necessary. This critical approach ensures that government is transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of public-sector workers.

The changing political landscape presents an opportunity for unions to redefine themselves in terms of their posture, assert their voices, and advance workers interests. Political and ideological differences amongst members of the GNU are not only a challenge, but an opportunity for unions to strategically advance the interests of their members. In order to protect and defend the interests of the Union's members, the PSA will focus on several key areas.

Policy advocacy

There is no doubt that the GNU will seek to review legislation and introduce new policies in line with the agreement it has been founded upon. As a critical stakeholder, the voice of labour in the policy discourse must be loud and critical. Unions have generally been robust in their engagements and have developed capacity for research and policy development. The PSA must use its research and policy think tank to shape the policy direction of the GNU. Its voice must not be silenced. The PSA must advocate for pro-worker policies and intensify lobbying capacity to defend job security, advocate for better working conditions, and improved wages and benefits. The PSA's think tank must help the Union to monitor policy changes and promptly respond to protect workers' interests.

Collective bargaining and negotiations

Unions' strength lies in their ability to bargain collectively. Public-sector unions need a united front to secure the interests of their members. Unions must not allow divisions in the GNU to find a space in labour. Unions must build alliances and collaborate with each other, civil society organisations, and community groups to build a stronger bargaining position. As a major Union in the public sector, the PSA must take a lead towards the development of a strategic negotiation plan, identify key priorities, and lobby other unions to get their buy in and support. This is the best way to develop effective negotiation tactics in a complex environment of the GNU. Collective bargaining must be prioritised, the negotiating power to secure fair wages, benefits, and working conditions for members.

The PSA will be robust in its engagement with government on policy advocacy, influencing the development of policies that positively affect the public-sector workforce.

Education, training, and development

The PSA must invest in the education and training of shop stewards. The political and economic environment is dynamic and precarious. It requires the PSA's leadership to be agile and to be fully equipped to navigate this complex environment. The PSA must focus the Union's education and training programmes on, amongst others, the understanding of the Union's leaders, shop stewards, and members of the fourth and fifth industrial revolution, artificial intelligence, and the digital economy. There must be a strong focus and emphasis on leadership development, collective bargaining, and labour rights. The PSA must promote union leadership development by identify and developing a strong and sustainable leadership pipeline. The PSA must strive to strengthen its organisational capacity, building strong, democratic structures that enable the Union to engage effectively with government and other stakeholders. The PSA will invest in education and training programs that equip the Union's leaders, shop stewards, and members with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the complexities of the GNU and the rapidly changing economic environment.

Partnerships and collaborations

Navigating a politically complex environment such as the GNU requires strong partnerships and collaborations. Unions must strive to build partnerships with civil society organisations, collaborations with community groups, and other stakeholders to promote public-sector workers' interests. This will assist in amplify the voice of organised labour and push for policies and programs that benefit members and the broader population.

The PSA must proactively engage with international labour organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO), to access best practices, training, and support. The approach is not to be antagonistic and maintain a hostile posture towards the GNU. The PSA needs to foster relationships with government departments. Such relationships must, however, be based on mutual respect and mutual benefit. One such department with which a strong and constructive relationship must be harnessed is the Department of Public Service and Administration as custodian of policies and legislation regulating and affecting members. The PSA must harness a collaborative relationship to strengthen influence in the area of policy and legislation.

Use of technology and digital platforms

We live in a digital age where communication is fast, and the reach is wide. The PSA must leverage digital platforms such as social media, online forums, and mobile apps, to communicate with members, share information, mobilise support, and reach a wider audience. The Union must strengthen its capacity to engage robustly in these platforms and promote the position of the PSA as a Union of Choice in the public sector. Holding on to outmoded strategies for recruitment of members will take the Union nowhere. The PSA must adapt with the times and develop strategies to organise, mobilise, and recruit members digitally, using online petitions, email campaigns, and virtual meetings. The Union must take advantage of the speed and the wider reach of digital platforms to strengthen communication channels with members, employers, and government to ensure effective representation and negotiation.

It is said that data is the new windfall of the current economic environment. The PSA's large membership database is a goldmine that is yet to be fully exploited to the Union's advantage. The PSA needs to use data analytics, gauge the perceptions of members, shape the direction of the Union, track its membership, and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies.

Protect independence

The PSA must not lose its independence and allow the employer to placate and neutralise the Union to the point of being ineffective. The PSA must not hesitate to take industrial action when necessary, using strikes and other forms of protest to defend members' interests. Whilst industrial action should always be a last resort, it remains a critical tool in the Union's arsenal, enabling it to exert pressure on government and other stakeholders.

The GNU has had a complex and multifaceted impact on public-sector unions in South Africa. Whilst the transition to democracy created opportunities for union growth and recognition, subsequent policies and challenges have led to tensions and conflicts. Ongoing issues, such as wage disputes, corruption, and precarious work, continue to affect the relationship between public-sector unions and government. Public-sector unions in South Africa should adopt a cooperative, yet critical approach towards the GNU. By working together with government whilst maintaining independence and critical edge, unions can protect the interests of their members whilst contributing to the country's development. Through collective bargaining, policy advocacy, organisational strengthening, alliance-building, and strategic use of industrial action, public-sector unions can ensure that the GNU delivers on its promise to create a more equitable and just society for all South Africans.