

## **Rouages dans la machine : les grèves des syndicats d'enseignants et du secteur public en Afrique du Sud de l'après-apartheid, entre 1999 et 2010**

Samuel Amoako

### *Résumé*

*Cet article examine la participation des deux plus importants syndicats d'enseignants d'Afrique du sud, la SADTU (South African Democratic Teachers' Union) et la NAPTOSA (National Professional Teachers' Association of South Africa), à une série de grèves du secteur public entre 1999 et 2010. Selon l'auteur, l'engagement des syndicats découlait de la frustration des enseignants devant l'attitude des employeurs lors des négociations pour améliorer les salaires et les conditions de travail résultant des politiques économiques néolibérales du gouvernement.*

*Après l'abolition de l'apartheid, les enseignants et leurs syndicats ont maintenu leur activisme pour défendre leurs conditions de vie et de travail, et se sont alliés à d'autres travailleurs du secteur public pour exiger de meilleurs salaires et l'amélioration des conditions de service. Les grèves étaient également liées à un mécontentement social et politique plus général engendré par la médiocre prestation des services, les inégalités croissantes et les ruptures périodiques au sein de l'alliance dirigeante du Congrès national africain (ANC).*

# **Cogs in the Wheel: Teacher Unions and Public Sector Strikes in Post-apartheid South Africa, 1999-2010**

Samuel Amoako<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

*This article examines the participation of the two largest teacher unions in South Africa, the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) and the National Professional Teachers' Association of South Africa (NAPTOSA), in public sector strikes from 1999 to 2010. The main contention is that the involvement of teachers' unions in these public sector strikes has been influenced, largely, by the pressures brought on teachers' salaries and related working conditions due to the government's neoliberal economic policies. The teachers' unions' frustrations with the employer's attitude towards negotiations for improved salaries and related working conditions within this neoliberal economic framework has caused them to resort to strikes. Thus, teachers, and their unions, in order to defend their material and working conditions, have maintained high levels of militancy, and have teamed up with other public sector workers to demand better wages and improved conditions of service for their members. However, the strikes are also linked to broader social and political discontent, including poor service delivery, growing inequality, and periodic ruptures in the ruling ANC alliance.*

## **Introduction**

An endemic feature of post-apartheid South Africa has been the spate of strikes and convulsive protest actions. They are commonly referred to as service delivery protests and have characterized all facets of society. The increasing number of service delivery protests and community riots has given rise to what scholars have termed the rebellion of the poor (Alexander 2010a; 2010b). Strikes and protests have, however, transcended the realm of the notional poor to involve the workers of South Africa's huge public sector, which organizes under the umbrella of the Congress of South Africa Trade Union

(COSATU). Public sector workers in South Africa have embarked on strikes frequently since 1999. Teachers' unions, the two largest unions in particular – SADTU and NAPTOSA – and their members, have been very visible in such strike actions. Emerging scholarship on post-apartheid public sector strikes has focused on the inherent contradictions in these strikes, as it plays out between the COSATU hierarchy and their alliance partners in the ANC on the one hand, and the COSATU leadership, its affiliate unions and the rank-and-file members on the other (Ceruti 2010; 2011). This article adds to the existing literature by examining teachers' unions' participation in such public sector strikes from 1999 to 2010. The analysis focuses on the two major unions, SADTU and NAPTOSA. This article aims to examine what factors have influenced SADTU and NAPTOSA's participation in these public sector strikes. Such an attempt will help to deepen our understanding of what forces have contributed to and conditioned teacher militancy in post-apartheid South Africa and thus help us to appreciate why, irrespective of their ideological and organisational differences, SADTU and NAPTOSA have often shared common grounds on their grievances and ganged up to contest the state on their grievances.

The central argument of this paper is that the teachers' unions, like other public sector unions, have maintained a militant posture and embarked on strike actions, largely because of the pressures brought on their salaries and living conditions by the neoliberal economic policies of the ANC government. The ANC government, since the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) in 1996, has committed itself to bringing about equity through a discourse of efficiency, cost-cutting and market-led reforms. This policy framework tampered with the welfarist component contained in the Redistribution and Development Programme (RDP) – a document, agreed upon by both labour and the ANC in 1994, prior to the transition, to guide the democratic transformation. The shift from RDP to GEAR seemed to have broken the social bond between labour and the ANC government, as the government continually became reluctant to accede to labour's demands, in keeping in tune with its policy to maintain fiscal discipline. The unions' frustration with the ANC government in negotiating for salary increases and improved conditions of service within this austere economic framework has often been the manifest reason for strike actions. However, broader

social and political undercurrents such as growing inequality, intermittent ruptures in the ruling alliance and poor service delivery, also fuelled these strikes.

The study draws on multiple primary sources originally used in research for my master's dissertation which related to teachers' unions and politics in Ghana and South Africa. It uses interviews that I conducted with union officials and retired union activists during the first half of 2011. Some data was also collected during the public sector strike action in 2010. My analysis of the 2010 strike is based partly on direct observation. Throughout the 2010 public sector strike, I attended teachers' meetings and pickets in the Gauteng area both as a researcher and as a sympathizer. All the interviews were conducted in the Gauteng region. In adhering to research ethics, I have referenced interviewees who preferred to remain unnamed as anonymous. The interviews and observations were complemented with information from official union documents, government documents and newspaper reports. The first part of the title of this article is borrowed from Anugwom (2002).

### **Teacher Militancy in South Africa**

Historically, there has been a relationship between teacher militancy and wider political developments in South Africa (Hyslop, 1990). Militancy amongst black teachers correlated with the rise and decline of African nationalism. In the 1940s, with the formation of black political movements and intensified black activism, teacher militancy resurged. It then declined in the 1960s, when the state successfully repressed all forms of opposition. When black activism rose again in the 1980s, teacher militancy emerged once more (Ibid). Two pivotal factors shaped this historic dynamic in teacher militancy in South Africa. Firstly, the contradictory class position of black teachers in a Capitalist apartheid economy and secondly, their position as members of a politically disenfranchised black majority (Govender 2006). Other explanations have to do with the infusion of young politicized teachers into the teaching profession, most of whom identified with other workers as they became proletarianized. Additionally, the political opportunity that provided space for militant action in the 1980s had an impact in shaping teacher militancy (Lekgoathi, 2007).

The changed socio-political climate in the late 1980s and the early 1990s significantly impacted teacher unionism and

activism. Teachers shifted their focus from grassroots activism to questioning teacher unity and the future political role of teachers in post-apartheid South Africa (Moll, 1989; 1991). The politics of teacher unity and the fashioning of a political role for teachers in a post-apartheid dispensation were intricate. The debate amongst the various teacher groups was characterised by near acrimony. They disagreed fundamentally on the dichotomy between teacher professionalism and teacher unionism and their future role in post-apartheid South Africa. While a section of the established teacher groups wanted to remain as professional organizations, the emergent groups preferred to organize as trade unions and affiliate with the national democratic movement (Moll, 1991).

With the reconfiguration of politics and society after the demise of apartheid, teacher activism would shift fundamentally to reflect the changed socio-political environment. Teacher organizations became active agents in fashioning the new order of education and subsequently have enjoyed a powerful presence at the negotiating table in the policy arena (Govender, 2004). This presence, however, has produced a complex relationship between the teachers' unions and the state, which is mediated by ideological fealty and political compromises (Ibid 2008). It must be emphasized, however, that teachers' struggles have been a response to the government's macro-economic and austere fiscal policies in the education terrain (Vally and Tleane, 2002). These contestations assume real political undertones, particularly, between SADTU and the Mbeki-led ANC administration (Fleisch, 2009: 118).

Thus, teacher militancy did not end after the transition to a post-apartheid dispensation (Chisholm, 1999). Instead, teacher militancy assumed new forms relative to the changed socio-political climate (Ibid, 1999:125). This new form of militancy has not been addressed in the recent literature on teachers' unions. This article attempts to shed light on some significant contours of teacher militancy in post-apartheid South Africa. I focus on oppositional political activity – which, of course, might take varied forms and exhibit differing aims or motivations. In this case, I am concerned with the strike actions of organized teachers. It is my position in this paper that the motivation for teacher militancy in post-apartheid South Africa is as much political as it is economic and that the two are not mutually exclusive. Teachers' unions have sought to fight for improved salaries and better conditions of service in response

to government's austere fiscal policies and economic measures. The teachers' struggles are implicitly political. They have implications for the political economy, and they reflect broader discontent stemming from a generalized disillusionment with the ANC's handling of post-apartheid transformation.

### **Historical Context of Teacher Unionism in South Africa**

Teacher unionism in South Africa has a long and rich history. Early unions mirrored the racial, political and economic cleavages that characterized all facets of South African society until the end of apartheid. By the turn of the 1960s, separate teachers' organizations existed for Blacks, Whites, Coloureds and Indians, operating in keeping with the provision of racialized education under the apartheid system (Hyslop, 1999; Pienaar, 1986; Peteni, 1978; Sono, 1999). These organizations followed a traditional notion of professionalism in approaching the educational departments, shunning militant actions and relying on consultation and persuasion (Govender, 2004: 271).

The increasing political struggles against apartheid rule in the 1980s enkindled the formation of several radical teacher organizations. These organizations relied on a workerist approach to dealing with educational issues, and they joined educational struggles with liberation struggles (Chisholm, 1999). They constituted themselves as non-racial educational workers and aligned with vanguard organizations of the liberation struggle such as the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) (Govender, 2004). Their strong workerist orientation and their leaning towards radical political proclivities pitched them against the older professional associations who organized under the umbrella of the African Teachers' Association of South Africa (ATASA). These established associations were labelled as conservative because of the way they prioritized the child over politics (Govender, 1996). The established unions also regarded the emergent radical unions as undifferentiated radicals concerned with politics at the expense of the child. These labels became 'symbolic markers of political difference' as they generated a discourse about whether teachers were 'workers' or professionals (Chisholm 1999: 114).

As the demand for a non-racial society intensified, there also developed an urgent need to unify the existing teachers'

organizations into a single non-racial teachers' union as a *sine-qua-non* for a democratic non-racial education system (Govender, 2004: 271). A National Teachers' Unity Forum (NTUF) was entrusted with this task (Moll, 1989). However, the NTUF failed in its mandate to create a single non-racial teachers' union. Consequently, there emerged two broad teacher organizations: the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) and National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA). SADTU was primarily comprised of the radical teacher organizations that espoused workerist orientations. NAPTOSA, on the other hand, was a federation of the 'White' racially based teacher organizations and some Black teacher associations that adhered to traditional notions of professionalism. In the subsequent sections, I turn to the discussion of the teachers' unions' participation in the public sector strikes. I begin with the strikes during Mbeki's reign as president from 1999 to 2009.

### **The Revolts against Mbeki's government**

Thabo Mbeki was elected into power in 1999 when Nelson Mandela retired at the end of his first presidential term. Mbeki's government witnessed increased strikes and social protests. SADTU alone accounted for 42% of all working days lost to strikes between 2004 and 2009. It is likely that the main reason for this was the decisive turn towards the adoption of the GEAR plan as the "centrepiece" of South Africa's path of growth (Marais, 2011: 119). The GEAR policy did not lead, inter-alia, to the creation of jobs and the improvement in social infrastructure, as the plan had envisaged (Ibid). Rather it contributed to widespread poverty and rising inequality (Pillay, 2008). This created not only labour and social discontent, but also divisive tendencies in the ruling alliance. Mathekgga (2008) has argued that the sustained implementation of GEAR marked the rift among Mbeki's administration, the ANC, and its other alliance partners. SADTU remained a staunch critic of GEAR - a position that incurred the wrath of Mbeki who, in his address at SADTU's 1998 congress, described SADTU members as nothing less than "competent practitioners of the toyi-toyi2... militant fighters for better pay cheques...excellent tacticians as to when to disrupt the school programme" posing as "the greatest pretenders to the title of the revolutionary agenda and militant opponents of Gear" (Mbeki, 1998:6).

At its National General Council in March 1999, SADTU resolved firstly, to fight against “retrenchment in the public and education sectors - to ensure that human resources are not further depleted at the expense of the social wage and quality public education” and secondly, to ensure that “no cuts take place in social services including health and education and that the principles and objectives of the RDP guide the budget” (SADTU, 1999: 1&3). It is clear from these pronouncements that SADTU was on a collision course with the ANC government under Mbeki whose GEAR policy emphasized fiscal prudence. On the other hand, NAPTOSA, keeping in tune with its traditionally a-political and conservative professional stance, remained quiet and stayed clear of such overt political pronouncements. Nevertheless, both SADTU and NAPTOSA would respond to the calls by COSATU for public sector action in 1999, 2004 and 2007 against Mbeki’s government. I argue that this is because the austere fiscal and economic planning during Mbeki’s administration pushed the teacher unions to the offensive. Teachers, just like other public sector workers, began to experience material privations and deteriorating working conditions.

#### *The First and Second Phases of the Revolts, 1999 and 2004*

The first revolt against Mbeki occurred in 1999. The strike, which lasted for a day, was called in response to a prolonged, seven-month salary negotiation, which began in January but failed to meet labour’s demands. In a meeting with the employer on 26 January, after government had announced its medium-term expenditure framework to workers, the unions tabled a demand for 10-15% salary increase and salary progression (Congress of South African Trade Unions, 1999). The unions rejected the counteroffer of 5.7% because it was below the inflation rate, which, at the time, was 8.3%. The employer ignored these demands and instead, announced a budget statement that called for wage restraints and consequently a wage-cut in the public sector. The unions reacted by giving the government 21 days to table a revised offer. The unions declared dispute again when talks reconvened in May because the government maintained their original offer of 5.7%. The unions threatened mass action involving lunchtime marches and pickets starting on 6 July, which, if the employer remained adamant, would ultimately lead to a full-blown strike on 29 July (Clarke and Basset, 1999: 3). The government intervened by convening an urgent meeting at the Public



Sector Coordinating Bargaining Council (PSCBC) on 21 July, where it revised its offer to 6%. The unions refused this offer as well.

Henry Hendricks, then executive director for NAPTOSA, said, “we are disgusted with the offer of an increase on average of only 0.3% more than their original offer. That translates to some corners into an improvement of only R9 per month” (cited in Pile, 1999: 5). Thulas Nxesi of SADTU noted that, “the two options left to the two parties are arbitration or strike action...” (Cited in Mecoamere, 1999:3) Subsequently, on 23 July SADTU staged a demonstration against the new offer. Even so, the government unilaterally implemented its offer of 6.3% across the board, and 7% for teachers and all lower paid workers. In reaction, COSATU called for a day’s strike on 24 August, to demonstrate its discontent with the government’s decision. SADTU responded, and for the first time NAPTOSA also joined them, stating that “[i]t was time teachers were treated as professionals” (cited in Warby, 1999:3).

The teachers’ unions lamented that teachers had been consistently denied an inflation-linked wage increase since 1996. The education minister, Asmal Kader, justified the government’s offer arguing that South African teachers cost more than double those in most other countries, citing Argentina and Mexico as examples (Pile, 1999: 5). The teachers’ unions were also concerned that the government’s ‘high-handed’ behaviour in implementing its wage offer was likely to continue in negotiating other issues such as conditions of service (Warby, 1999: 3). Indeed, the way the government handled the negotiations suggested that it had predetermined its offer without any room for adjustment.

For the teachers’ unions, the strike was about demanding a ‘living wage’ - a wage that could meet the rising cost of basic necessities - not just for teachers but for all public sector workers. However, the government framed these demands as selfish. Mbeki contended that acceding to workers’ demands could derail the government’s reconstruction priorities (Clarke and Basset, 1999: 3). When asked in an interview to comment on the ANC government’s responses to public sector wage demands, a SADTU official countered: “we have the mandate to say what we term a living wage irrespective of what the policy of ANC says...” (Anonymous, 28 March 2011 Interview). This statement is significant in one respect: even though SADTU and other workers in COSATU may mobilize support for an ANC victory, it does not mean they necessarily

support its policies, particularly when they go against the interests of workers. It is therefore, suggested that the intermittent tensions that arise between SADTU and its alliance partner, the ANC, are a function of SADTU's articulation of members' interests in terms of wages and conditions, which sometimes contradict the budget priorities of the government. A founding member of SADTU explained that:

*What you feel in your pocket and what you feel in your stomach is beginning to affect teachers more and that is probably and strangely enough the most aggravating kind of influence on SADTU's role within COSATU. Because like your lower paid worker down the line, teachers themselves are also beginning to articulate those sentiments because of their living experience in terms of their disposable income, etcetera. So in terms of that, it is posing new challenges I suppose within this neoliberal framework. It is posing challenges as to how the union think of its role and how it ought to be fighting for a space within the body politic in terms of the broader alliance, but also in terms of the economic persuasion of government (Anonymous, 31 May 2011 Interview).*

Five years after the 1999 strike, the teachers' unions again joined a public sector strike, which at the time was hailed as the biggest since the demise of apartheid. This 2004 strike was one of a series of protests that characterized the period. There were sporadic protests throughout the country – significant ones being the call by the Socialist Student Movement for a 500-strong day of action for free education on 9 September. A week earlier, high schools in the Free State protested against poor services. There were also protests on housing in Protea Glen and Diepkloof in Soweto (Hamilton, 2004). The strike thus reflected a generalized dissatisfaction during Mbeki's reign. Hamilton's (Ibid) observation during the period is instructive:

*The deterioration of conditions of service over the past 5 years, as well as the decline in infrastructure and the reduction in quality of service delivery in health and education have resulted in an exodus of public sector workers leaving the service to go overseas... Electricity and water cuts, evictions for non-payment for rents and*

*rates, containment of wage increases and retrenchments have all continued to provoke the masses.*

Indeed, similar sentiments were expressed two years earlier by SADTU at its 2002 annual national congress in Durban. SADTU bemoaned the sorry state of teachers, resulting from, among other things, the lack of water and electricity in their communities, delayed salary payments and premature death resulting from HIV/AIDS (Compton and Weiner, 2008: 4). Thus, the appalling conditions under which teachers lived and worked influenced their resorting to strikes. Habib (2003: 16), drawing on McDonald and Pape's argument, corroborates this, noting that: "people's inability to pay their bills resulted in over ten million power and water cut-offs, with over two million more people being victims of rates and rent eviction, an indication of increased poverty and inequality in real terms", hence *growing discontent* [emphasis mine].

The precursor to the 2004 strike was a march organized by SADTU on 2 September to demonstrate its frustration over stalled negotiation as the government refused to improve its initial offer (Hamilton, 2004). Negotiation had started in June with the government tabling an offer of 4.4% plus 1% pay progression to make it 5.4%. Labour on the other hand, demanded 12.2%. The unions revised their offer to 8% for 2004, 9% increase for 2005/2006, and a 10% increase for 2006/2007. They also demanded an increased subsidy on medical and housing aid. Specific to teachers, they demanded the urgent implementation of pay progression and 'rank and leg' promotion, backlogged since 1996 (see National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers, 2004).

Both labour and government remained unbending and in August, the unions declared deadlock. SADTU then staged the 2 September strike. Both SADTU's action and labour's threat to call a nation-wide strike forced the Minister of Public Service and Administration, Fraser Moleketi, to the negotiating table on 3 September. In a series of meetings between 3 and 13 September, the government raised its offer to 6% while labour's demand was for 7%. This new offer was to span the following two years linked to the inflation rate of any given year. Labour was prepared to accept the offer provided adjustment was made for the following financial years to exceed the inflation rate. The government refused to accept this condition and withdrew its offer (PSCBC, 2005:12). In response, the

workers embarked on a march on 16 September.

The teachers' unions argued that the government had short-changed them over the past years using for example, the backlog in their pay progression since 1996, which meant that long-serving teachers still received the same remuneration as newly recruited teachers. Consequently, NAPTOSA, which was less prone to join strike actions, united with SADTU to demand improved wages and conditions of service. Anthea Ceresto, then Chairperson of the National Union of Educators - Gauteng, an affiliate of NAPTOSA, stated that, "we can't ride on the back of SADTU and other unions. Teachers have to unite for the sake of our profession" (cited in Brown, 2004:1). Dave Balt, then president of NAPTOSA, argued that teachers were unfairly treated and hence needed to make their frustrations known. He stated, "[t]he strike is in reaction to the poor salary offer made by the state. The morale of educators is very low. This poor salary increase offer has proved to be the final straw for them [teachers]" (cited in Dhliwayo, 2004:1). This pronouncement by the NAPTOSA affiliates is indicative of a change in the consciousness of the NAPTOSA members who had previously been less prone to joining public sector strikes.

The Government and the unions settled the strike on 29 September with an agreement that tied both parties to a three-year multi-term wage settlement. It provided for 6.2% salary increase in 2004, and a salary increase of the projected inflation rate plus 0.4% in 2005 and 2006. In addition, workers received a 1% pay progression based on performance and seniority. However, the government deferred payment of housing subsidy to persons who were not benefiting from an existing homeowners' allowance for a year (South African Reserve Bank, 2004). In addition, teachers were to receive an estimated block sum of R800 million (approx. USD 93 023 255)<sup>3</sup> to compensate for the lack of pay progression between 1996 and 2002. This pleased NAPTOSA affiliates. Dave Shutte, the President of NUE, an affiliate of NAPTOSA, stated in his 2004 report:

*I trust that members are pleased with the victory achieved by NUE through NAPTOSA in the salary negotiations. The one-day strike conveyed a very powerful message to the state and I know that it was the overwhelming support from fellow professionals and the widespread support from parent communities that forced the state to concede*

*to salary backlogs that have plagued teachers since 1996 (Shutte, 2004:4).*

The implementation of this offer became a source of contention between the teachers' unions and the state. A month after the end of the strike the Government claimed that there were not enough funds to pay the teachers (Blaine, 2004: 1). It seemed that the government made the offer without critically considering the financial implications. In response, the teacher unions declared dispute and threatened to revert to strike action and leave matric examination papers unmarked if government did not find an immediate solution to the dispute (Baloyi, 2004: 1). After conciliation in the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), the policy was implemented in March 2005 (ELRC, 2005). It is clear from the account that the material privation of teachers and frustrated negotiations over wages and general improvements in their working conditions had compelled them to join the strike.

#### *The Final Revolt against Mbeki's government*

The end of the 2004 strike seemed more like a cooling period for a much more militant agitation. Both NAPTOSA and SADTU once more heeded COSATU's call for a strike in 2007. This final revolt against Mbeki's government took time to mature, but when it exploded, it came from several fronts. From 2004, some of the poorest townships took to the streets to demand service delivery. These protests demanded not only "the better life promised in the ANC campaigns, but also accountable government" (Ceruti, 2011:151). Alongside these convulsive protests was simmering discontent among workers because of dissatisfaction with the 2004 wage settlement. The government's success at pushing three-year multi-term wage agreement on labour in 2004, which meant that unions could not negotiate a wage increase for three years, built up rage in the labour front. There were also growing concerns over increasing general inequality and wage inequality in particular, between top public servants such as government officials and ordinary public servants (Majola, 2007: 6). These smouldering discontents eventually culminated in 2007 into what Ceruti (2007) described as the biggest strike wave since the end of apartheid, and an exacerbating crisis in South African politics, which resulted in shaking a government that was reluctant to increase pay for millions

of public sector workers.

Just like in 2004, the strike was kick-started by government sticking to a 6% wage offer compared to the workers' 12% demand. The unions were now against an inflation-linked increment, which according to them had not resulted in any real wage increase for workers over ten years. The government argued for an inflation-linked increment and a multi-term agreement of four years (Natal Witness 17 May 2007; Daily News 7 May 2007: 1). The government argued that acceding to the demand of the workers would result in a doubling of the wage bill for the year (Letsoalo, 2007:1). Labour on the other hand argued that the Government's 6% offer fell short of the objectives of "halt[ing] the declining purchasing power of our salaries and ...bring[ing] about real improvements in the living standard of our members" (Mbanjwa, 2007: 1). The unions said that, "the reason why government is making such a miserable offer is that it remained committed to its neo-liberal Growth Employment and Redistribution policy" (Ibid). The resulting deadlock led workers to strike for three weeks. SADTU was the first of the COSATU affiliated unions to start mass action, with marches and pickets on 25 May, preceding the general strike on 1 June. Both NAPTOSA and SADTU deplored the government's revised offer of 6% as pathetic. They remained resolute in their demand for a 12% increment after government tabled its final offer of 6.5% (Keating, 2007)). Dave Balt, then President of NAPTOSA stated, "we will not settle for anything less than a two figure increase" (cited in Cape Argus, 23 April 2007: 1) Thulas Nxesi, SADTU general secretary said government's 6% offer was a "slap in the face of workers" (Kgosana, 2007: 1). The unions argued that since 2004, teachers' wages increased merely by an average of 0.7% above inflation, hence this strong position (NAPTOSA n.d.).

The demand for higher salaries was tied to the shortage of teachers and consequent educator overload. In February 2007, both NAPTOSA and SADTU drew the attention of the education authorities to overcrowded classrooms in the Western Cape. They indicated that the agreed pupil-teacher-ratio of 1:38 for primary schools and 1:33 for high school was exceeded and that teachers had to accommodate more than 50 pupils in some classes. They therefore advised the Department of Education (DoE) to revise its post-provisioning model (Keating, 2007: 1). It was likely that the situation was partly a spillover of the teacher rationalization policy,

which the government had started implementing since 1996. But NAPTOSA also argued that teacher shortages resulted from poor remuneration (Blaine, 2007:1). Dave Balt, head of NAPTOSA noted that: “Teachers were definitely feeling the crunch now. The critical factor is the number of teachers we are training. It is frightening that there are less than 5000 teachers graduating this year. The big problem is the salaries.” (NAPTOSA, 2007a: 7).

Government negotiators, in a bid to avert a strike just before matric examinations, offered R8.1 billion to be set aside by the finance ministry to improve conditions of service and educators’ salaries. The budget statement read: “Over the next three years, we are making available an additional R8.1 billion to hire additional teachers, teaching assistants and support staff in schools and districts and to improve the remuneration levels of teachers” (Ministry of Finance, 2007:13). However, the unions were not persuaded. Thulas Nxesi argued that the offer would not make any difference in teachers’ conditions in 2007 since it was to be implemented in 2008 (Kgosana, 2007:1). Their demand was for “action now.”

The teachers’ unions also lamented that the DoE’s policies made it impossible to discipline pupils (Hawker, 2007:1). Monareng, a retired educationist and the research officer for NAPTOSA explained that:

*The manner in which the education departments deal with learners in school situation where there are some rights that affect teachers negatively makes teachers unhappy. The manner government looks at the issue of rights, which make it, seem as if the learners have more rights than the teachers makes work difficult for the teachers (Amos Monareng, Interview 11 March 2011).*

Consequently, the unions accused the education authorities of being insensitive to teachers’ predicament. They also accused the DoE of failing to protect teachers from abuse by students. For the teachers the strike demonstrated their frustration to the authorities about the numerous problems in the education sector. Their participation in the strike was thus a consequence of the gradual build-up of tensions ranging from growing inequality, a widening wage gap and the appalling conditions under which they worked.

The employer, on 22 June, tabled a final offer and gave the unions 21 days to sign the agreement or it would implemented

unilaterally. The offer included a 7.5% rise in pay excluding a 1% pay progression to take retroactive effect from 1 July 2007. The pay increase was subject to the inflation rate plus 1% for 2008 and an option to negotiate a wage increment for 2009 financial year. The medical aid subsidy for Government Employee Medical Scheme members and housing subsidy for public sector workers were also increased. In addition, educators had the option to negotiate a new salary structure, the Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) in the ELRC (see PSCBC, 2007). Both NAPTOSA and SADTU declined to sign the offer however, because it was below their expectation. Indeed, the 2007 wage settlement gave a very small margin above that year's inflation rate of 7.1%, compared to 2006, when the average increment of 6.4% outstripped inflation at 4.6% (National Labour and Economic Development Institute, 2008:5). Thobile Ntola, then deputy president of SADTU, stated that, "the offer is not what we wanted and the way forward will be determined by the employer's attitude" (cited in Mudzuli, 2007:1) NAPTOSA echoed a similar position stating that the "...offer did not meet NAPTOSA's "fall back" position on a range of issues" (NAPTOSA, 2007b). Mike Myburg (15 March 2011, Interview) explained that: "we in NAPTOSA did not sign because SADTU didn't sign." This statement is worthy to note for two main reasons. Firstly, it seems to suggest that solidarity is becoming stronger between the two unions. Secondly, it points to a change in the consciousness of NAPTOSA, whose affiliates in the past would have had nothing to do with public sector strikes because of their adherence to teacher 'professionalism'. They now seem to be leaning more towards bread and butter issues. This suggests that the problems of teachers in post-apartheid South Africa have started to transcend previous adherence to any form of professional idealism. Irrespective of their ideological differences, the teachers' unions are likely to confront the state when their salaries and related work conditions are tampered with.

### **What Next After Mbeki's Government? (2008-2010)**

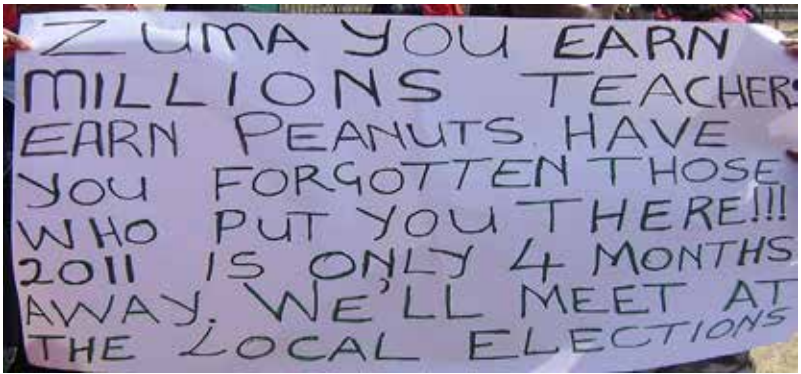
The recall of Mbeki by the ANC and his subsequent resignation as the president of South Africa in 2008 did not end the convulsive protests and incessant public sector strikes that had become an endemic feature of South African society. COSATU and the SACP had rallied support behind Zuma's presidential bid even after he was relieved of his position as Deputy President by Mbeki



because of corruption charges. They believed that Zuma was more likely to be sympathetic towards working-class interest than Mbeki (Pillay, 2008: 16–17). However, two years after Zuma had assumed office as president, public sector workers engaged in a ‘mega’ strike that brought the number of strike days to a new high since the demise of apartheid (Ceruti 2010).

While NAPTOSA observed Zuma’s rise to power from the sidelines, SADTU played a crucial role in his election. SADTU endorsed Zuma’s bid for ANC Presidency and his subsequent election as national president (SADTU, 2007). SADTU’s support stemmed from the belief that a Zuma government would improve teachers’ salaries and conditions of service (SADTU, 2006). The first year of Zuma’s administration did not see much protest from labour. SADTU was particularly impressed with the government’s wage increases in 2009. Teachers’ salaries were increased on a sliding scale between 10% and 13% with the average being 11.5%. The hike was in accordance with SADTU’s demand for a double-digit increase and a sliding scale to narrow the wage gap (SADTU, 2009:1). After a year in office, however, the Zuma government became reluctant to accede to labour’s demands. The consequence was a massive strike in 2010. Apart from the overt political undertones that characterized the strike, the teachers’ unions’ participation was mainly about improvement in their economic conditions, unlike in 2007, when specific work conditions were critical to their grievances. Indeed, SADTU’s demands, which were no different from NAPTOSA’s and the consolidated demands of workers, read: “to end poverty wage and to improve public service delivery we demand the following: 8.6% wage increase, single term agreement, R1, 000 (approx. USD 127) housing allowance, equalization of medical aid subsidies, implementation date of 1 April” (SADTU, 2010a). The Government’s refusal to meet these demands precipitated a 21-day strike in August.

Salary negotiations for 2010 had begun in October 2009 but the process was deferred in order to avoid disrupting the world cup. The unions expected cooperation from the government because it had easily caved-in to an above-inflation salary adjustment in 2009 (Ceruti 2011, 153). This misplaced confidence should be understood within the logic of SADTU’s influence in COSATU and the role it played in Zuma’s rise to power. The sense of betrayed expectations was encapsulated in a homemade placard carried by a SADTU teacher during the strike:



Picture taken by Author at SADTU (Gauteng branch) rally at Elkah Stadium, Soweto 25 August 2010.

The message on the placard is an obvious reference to SADTU's role in Zuma's rise to power and SADTU's power to reverse it. A Gauteng delegate to SADTU's annual conference stated that "[t]he Zuma administration treats teachers with contempt. There is total disregard for us. We are just voting materials...we rescued his political career from obscurity; now that he is in power, we no longer matter" (Mataboge, Letsoalo, and Seekoei, 2010).

It appeared that SADTU's economic demands during the strike were also tied to alliance politics and its belief that Zuma would reciprocate the union's support for his rise to power with increased wages and improved conditions of service. SADTU resolved to strike after government failed to revise its 6.5% wage offer and merely increased housing subsidy from R500 (approx. USD 63.6) to R620 (approx. USD 78.9) per month. NAPTOSA also rejected the offer. They argued that if teachers accepted the offer, they would never be able to afford decent accommodation let alone survive in the midst of fuel, electricity and municipal service hikes. Both unions became agitated when, after a meeting in the PSCBC with the minister of Public Service, Richard Baloyi, the government increased its housing subsidy by R10 (SADTU, 2010b). NAPTOSA described the offer as ridiculous accusing the Minister of acting in bad faith. Consequently, NAPTOSA proceeded to ballot its members for a strike (NAPTOSA Limpopo, 2010a).

Even so, the leadership of both unions was concerned about the impending matriculation examination and the likely effects of their strike action on students SADTU lamented that it had taken

every step to avert the strike in order to find an amicable settlement, but the government was reluctant to negotiate in good faith. Consequently, even while it declared dispute and was balloting its members for a strike, it encouraged its rank to continue working (SADTU, 2010b). NAPTOSA took a similar position noting that the decision to embark on strike had not been taken lightly. It expressed concern that while it believed in the inalienable right of every child to quality education, it also had the mandate to protect and enhance the conditions of service of education sector employees (NAPTOSA Limpopo, 2010b).

SADTU began its mass action on 6 August by declaring non-cooperation with the employer at all levels. Members were to refuse to attend any meeting, workshop/training programme, convened by the employer at the workplace. This was to culminate into a full-blown strike on 10 August 2010. NAPTOSA on the other hand declared its intention to strike on 3 August 2010, and instructed its membership to participate in the 10 August strike. After the warning strike on 10 August, the government tabled a revised offer of 7%, which was rejected. The teachers' unions argued that the state was insensitive to the plight of teachers, as it overworked and underpaid them compared to other workers with similar qualifications. A SADTU official explained:

*As SADTU, we are saying we give our sacrifices to the department. Let them do the same to us. If you look at our counterparts in the banking sector (ABSA) they are also parastatal, they are also government paid. If you look at their salaries and you look at ours, what we think is the highest pay in our sector is actually the lowest in that organisation. So these are the demands. We cannot continue to give to the nation while the government does not give. (Anonymous 28 March 2011, Interview)*

The teachers' grievances were not limited to salary. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the government's low housing grant, and insufficient medical aid subsidy. Due to South Africa having the highest real interest rate in the world during 2010, most teachers might have been engulfed by debt not out of wasteful spending but by accruing it from necessary expenditure, particularly on housing (Gentle, 2010). It was thus likely that the material privations of the teachers motivated them to embark on strike.

The DoE however, sidestepped the grievances of the teachers and instead published in the media that a newly recruited teacher earned a salary package of R229, 790 (approx. USD 29 235) annually. This appeared to be an attempt to arouse public sentiment against the striking teachers (Michelle, 2010: 1). The teachers' unions responded by accusing the government of lying about how much teachers were paid. NAPTOSA's Western Cape Chief Executive, Helene Siebörger, argued that the DoE's calculation assumed that teachers would receive a housing allowance, despite rules that disqualified them if a spouse was paid same allowance. She further noted that the department's calculation was based on the pretence that a teacher would receive a medical aid subsidy for him/herself and four dependants (Michelle, 2010).

Maluleke (2010: 2) notes that the "employer's misinformation published in the media, provocative and untrue statements from Ministers backfired and probably lengthened the dispute and entrenched attitudes." In addition, based on the fact that the Government was able to make huge expenditure on constructing stadia and related facilities for the world cup, teachers were convinced that the government had the money to meet their demands (Ceruti, 2011: 153). The combination of this with the government's refusal to settle the demands of public sector workers despite having reached a settlement of the demands of workers in parastatal, was the final straw (Maluleke, 2010: 2).

The strike presented a political conundrum to President Zuma. He was caught between acceding to the demands of the workers who politically and financially supported his rise to power and salvaging a stressed economy. Indeed, the country's economic recovery from a 2% GDP decline in 2009 was already faltering and a 3% growth rate announced for 2010 was widely ridiculed, as the first half of 2010 experienced continued job losses (Bond 2010). Under the circumstances, the government seemed cautious to grant the demands of labour, as that could aggravate what appeared to be a staggering economy. Eventually, Zuma intervened and ordered the parties back to the negotiating table. The government tabled a revised offer of 7.5% to be implemented retroactively from 1 July and a housing subsidy of R800 (approx. USD 101.9). In addition, it promised to investigate the equalization of the medical aid scheme and a new home ownership policy scheme, which was to be implemented on 1 April 2011 (NAPTOSA Limpopo, 2010b).

COSATU general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, persuaded the unions to accept the offer (Ceruti, 2011: 153). NAPTOSA signed the offer, but SADTU refused, arguing that the agreement did not meet its fallback plan.

## **Conclusion**

The reconfigurations in politics and society after the demise of apartheid rule have had a decisive impact on teacher unionism. Teacher unionism has been institutionalized and teachers' unions have played active and varied roles in the education policy terrain. However, the pressures of government's neoliberal economic planning and austerity budget on teachers' salaries and related working conditions have pushed their unions into the offensive mode, leading them to join public sector strike actions, to demand improved salaries and better conditions of service. By sticking to its neo-liberal economic framework, which dictated financial prudence and fiscal austerity, the ANC government left the teachers' unions with no other option than to maintain high level of militancy. This culminated into strike actions to secure, primarily, the material interests of their members and maintain better conditions of service for the profession. Other public sector unions have experienced this as well. The teachers' unions have thus joined other public sector workers for strike actions because they share with other public sector workers common experiences regarding the blistering effects of the ANC government's austere fiscal and economic policies on workers generally. Resorting to strike actions was often goaded by the unions' frustrations over stalled negotiations and the reluctance of the ANC government to accede to their salary demands and their request for better conditions of service.

We must stress that fundamentally, the motivation behind the strike actions during Mbeki's reign were no different from those during Zuma's administration. The bottom line of workers' agitation remained, fundamentally, the demand for better salaries and improved conditions of service. The ANC government found it inexpedient to accede to these demands, because it remained committed to the implementation of its austere fiscal measures. A fundamental difference, however, seems to be that while Mbeki lost popularity with workers and core constituencies of the ANC because of his unbridled commitment to the implementation of GEAR, Zuma (after his removal from office as Vice President and during his early

days in office as President), enjoyed the sympathy of workers, at least, the union hierarchy, as he was regarded as pro-workerist. Ironically, this support seemed to carry with it an expectation of better terms for workers. Thus, the revolt against Zuma's government in 2010 was partly the result of Zuma betraying the expectations of the workers who financially and politically, had supported his rise to power. We must stress, however, that while SADTU's involvement in these public sector strikes is not unexpected, because of its traditional workerist orientation and its affiliation to COSATU, NAPTOSA's response to the strike calls is most interesting. It points to a change in the consciousness of NAPTOSA, suggesting that teachers' unions, whether or not they adhere strictly to the professionalism credo would become confrontational if their material and related working conditions are compromised as these are themselves significant markers of professionalism.

The public sector strikes generally appear to be fuelled by broader socio-political discontent. As Ceruti (2011) has shown, service delivery protests, crisis in the ruling ANC-led alliance and public sector strikes seem to be integrally linked. It is therefore no co-incidence that the public sector strikes often occur on the heels of service delivery protests and have many times assumed both covert and overt political undertones. SADTU being one of the most visible and well-represented affiliates of COSATU, has thus, often linked its strike demands to alliance politics both covertly and overtly, clearly exposing the inherent contradiction in the role of labour in the ANC ruling alliance. NAPTOSA has however, managed to stay committed to its traditionally non-politicized position. Nevertheless, the fact that both SADTU and NAPTOSA have often shared common grounds on their grievances and in their opposition to the state suggests that the grievances presented during these strikes were germane to the concerns of the entire teaching profession. It also suggests, but perhaps less significantly, that the supposed ideological and political differences between SADTU and NAPTOSA have been blurred, firstly, by economic considerations and secondly, by their shared experience as interest groups engaged in education delivery, thus, pushing them to adopt common ground to secure the interests of their members and the teaching profession general.

## Endnotes

1. Lecturer, Department of History Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana and Associate Research Fellow of the South African Research Unit in Social Change in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg. I am grateful to Claudia Ortu and Jim Weiller for comments on earlier drafts.
2. Toyi-toyi is a South African militant dance characteristic of anti-apartheid struggles.
3. The average exchange rate in 2004 was USD 1 = ZAR 8.6. In 2010, it was 7.86.

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