

A poem composed for the launch of COSATU, South Africa's 750,000-strong trade union federation, by Mi D'Dumo Hlatshwayo and Alfred Temba Qabula

O'maker of all things
grief
assails you from all sides
each step forward you take
Brings emnity nearer
What is the nature of your
sin?

In the factories
your enemy suffocates you
on this side; the bosses
on that the boss-boys¹

Attackers and assailants
stalk you
from all chambers
and channels...
Permits and money
become the slogans
through which
they pounce on you
What is the nature of your
sin?

Your labour power
has turned you
into prize-game
for the hunters of surplus
What is the nature of your
sin?

In the buses
in the trains and taxis
you are the raw-meat,
the prey
for vultures
Are you not the backbone
of trade?
What is the nature of your
sin?

Worker
your rulers
have dumped you
away from the cities,
Now all the misfits and
orphans
of other nations
can suck you dry

Now
you are a nameless breed of
animals
a stock of many numbers
and your suppressor's lust
to suck you dry
recognises neither day
nor night
What is the nature of your
sin?

Your hand
has developed
a drunkard's tremble
it can no longer draw
straight lines
to steer you clear
between the law enforcers
and the bandits

Worker
are you not the economy's
foundation?
are you not the engine
of development and
progress?

Worker
remember
what you are:
you are the country's
foundation base and block

Oh maker of all things
the world over
worker
your capacity to continue
loving
surprises me, its enormity
touches the Drakensberg
mountains
What is then
the nature of your sin?

Your sin:
Can it be your power?
Can it be your blood?
Can it be your sweat?

They scatter you about
with their hippos
with their vans
and kwela-kwelas
with their teargas
you are butchered
by the products of your
labour
the labour of your hands
these are the cries of the
creator of all this
Cosatu
Woza msebenzi, woza
Cosatu, woza freedom²

Oh Cosatu
we workers
have travelled a long way
here

Yes: we have
declared wars
on all fronts
for better wages

Yet,
victory eludes us.

We
have dared to fight back
even from the bottom of the
earth
where we pull wagons-full of
gold
through our blood.

We have come from the
sparkling kitchens
of our bosses.



Tears of

We have arrived from the
exhausting
tumult of factory machines.

Victory eludes us still!

Cosatu
here we are!
Heed our cry —
we have emerged
from all corners of this land
we have emerged
from all organisations.
We have emerged
from all
the country's nooks and
crannies!

We say today
that
our hope is in your hands
We are ready.

We say:
Let your hands deliver us

from exploitation
Let our freedom be borne
Let our democracy be borne
Let our new nation be borne.

Cosatu
Stand up now with dignity
March forward
We are raising our clenched
fists behind you

Behind us
we call into line
our ancestors in struggle
Maduna and Thomas Mbeki
Ray Alexander and Gana
Makhabeni
JB Marks and hundreds
more³.

Where are you ancestors?
Lalalani and witness:
Here is the mammoth
creature
you dreamed of

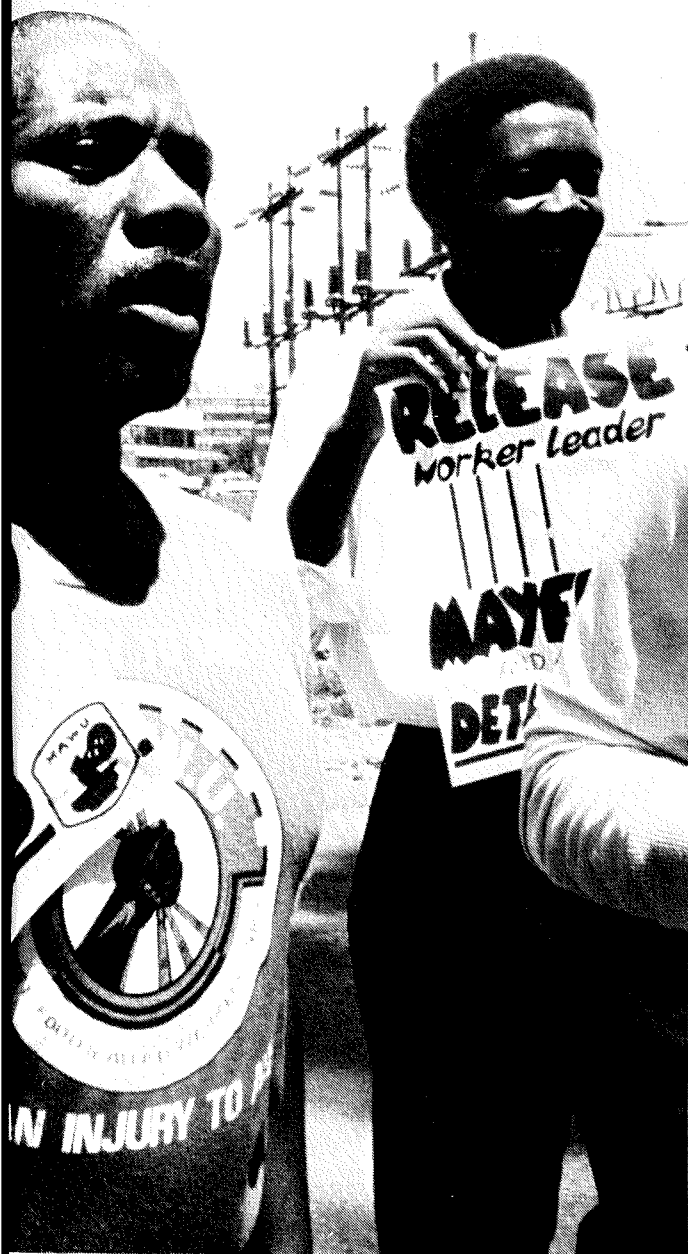


Photo: IDAF.

a creator

you wanted to create
the one you hoped for
Here is the workers'
freedom train!

It is made up of old wagons
repaired and patched up ox-
carts
rolling on the road again
back again
revived!

Once capsized by Champion
the wagon — once derailed
by Kadalie!⁴

Here it rolls ahead
to settle accounts with the
oppressors
to settle accounts with the
exploiters.

Here it is:
the tornadosnake —
Kanyamba with
its floods!

its slippery torso!
Here it is: Cosatu
The spears of men
shall be deflected!

Here it is:
the tornadosnake of change!
Kanyamba,
the cataclysm
clamped for decades and
decades
by a mountain of rules.
the tornadosnake
poisoned throughout the
years
by ethnicity
and tribalisms.

Here is this mammoth
creature
which they mocked!
That it had no head
and certainly no teeth!

Woe unto you oppressor
Woe unto you exploiter

We have rebuilt its head
we lathed its teeth on our
machines.
The day this head rises
beware of the day these
teeth shall bite.

On that day:
mountains of lies shall be
torn to shreds
the gates of apartheid shall
burst asunder
the history books of
deception shall be thrown
out

Woza langa
Usuku
Woza Federation
Woza Freedom

Cosatu
Stop now
listen to our sound

You'll hear us sing
that the rulers
and employers
are sorcerers!

Do not smile
Do not dare disagree

If that was devoid of truth
Where is the ICU of the
1920s to be found?
Where is the FNETU of the
'30s to be found?
Where is the CNETU of the
'40s to be found?
and the others⁵.

They emerged
they were poisoned
then
they faded!

Cosatu
Today be wise!

In the desert
only the fruit-trees
with long and sturdy roots
survive!

Learn that
and you shall settle accounts
with the oppressor
you shall settle accounts
with the exploiter
you shall settle accounts
with the racists.

Here is Cosatu
who knows no colour
Here then is our
tornadosnake Kanyamba

Helele⁶
Cosatu

Helele
workers of South Africa

Helele,
transport workers
Helele,

miners of wealth
Helele,
cleaners of the bosses'
kitchens
Helele,
builders of the concrete
jungle
Helele,
workers of South Africa.
Helele,
makers of all things.

Woza msebenzi! woza
Cosatu! woza freedom!
From SALB.

The authors of this piece
are members of the Metal
and Allied Workers Union
(now called NUMSA) and
the Durban Workers
Cultural Local, a cultural
group of workers who pro-
duce songs, plays and
poems for, by and about
the workers, their lives and
their struggles.

1. Boss boys is a nickname
for 'tribal' representatives
or indunas who help control
the miners in the migrant
labour system.

2. 'Woza' — 'come'.

3. Maduna, Mbeki, Alex-
ander, Makhabeni and J B
Marks were all trade union
activists in the '50s or
earlier. J B Marks was
secretary of the African
mineworkers' union during
the 1946 strike.

4. Kadalie and Champion
were both leaders of the
ICU, a trade union organisa-
tion of the 1920s which was
actually in the main a rural
movement. They fell out in
obscure circumstances and
the organisation collapsed.

5. The Federation of Non-
European Trade Unions
(FNETU) was a small body
which managed to gain
some foothold, particularly
in the laundry industry,
where some unity was
established between black
and white workers. This
was done in the difficult
conditions of depression
during the '30s.

CNETU, the Council of
Non-European Trade
Unions, was founded in
1941. It grew against a
backdrop of working-class
militancy fuelled by the
economical revival and the
war. The federation became
polarised between left and
right. The Communist Party
opposed strikes for most of
the war, whereas the left,
which included Trotskyists
like Dan Khoza, Max Gor-
don, and the Workers In-
ternational League, formed
a left opposition called the
Progressive Trade Union
group in CNETU. The PTU
was built out of a series of
strikes by black workers
which the SACP opposed.

6. 'Helele' — 'hail'.