

The time has come to change the conversation.

Post Marikana, the role and relevance of social dialogue, and the challenges facing the SA labour market have come strongly to the fore. The platinum sector strike by Amcu - the longest in our history - has recently given rise to loud noises about the labour market and its institutions and legislation. Unfortunately much of this debate in the media tends to be sensationalised, misinformed and politically expedient. In the current environment it is short-sighted to use our social dialogue institutions as political punching bags.

Those wishing to deflect attention seem to have conveniently forgotten commitments made by the social partners after the Marikana Massacre which should have ensured the beginning of a fundamental transformation of the mining sector. Perhaps a more useful starting point would be an assessment of how far implementation has come since 2012.

We are a long way from the consensus-making ethos that characterised the early 1990s – an ethos which inspired all the social partners to create South Africa's post-Apartheid labour relations framework and its family of institutions which includes Nedlac, the Bargaining Councils, CCMA and the SETAS

These were envisaged as spaces for negotiation, consultation, information-sharing joint problem solving and cooperation. They are also institutions that act as shock absorbers to soak up the necessary conflict generated in a country marked by high levels of unemployment, inequality and poverty. A country where extreme destitution - even of those who have jobs - goes hand in hand with extreme excess and wealth.

It seems apparent that many of our recent upheavals have less to do with the specific design of laws or institutions and more to do with the capacity, conduct and commitment of the social actors involved. This leads to a more intractable challenge for the future of social dialogue, tripartism and collective bargaining. It calls for strong leadership and a paradigm shift away from the culture of adversarialism and a greater focus on build relationships and network of trust and collaboration rather than just legislative intervention and institutional redesign

As a start it requires a deeper appreciation and a more open and frank conversation about the underlying causes of the apparent failures we are currently witnessing.

The ideal preconditions for successful social dialogue include a willing government that is committed to engaging social partners in a meaningful way. It also requires social partners who are strongly organised, competent and committed to engaging in consensus seeking forms of engagement. And of course it requires well -resourced and managed institutions to administer and support the processes of engagement. Needless to say on many of these counts we fall far short.

Presently it seems that the social partners are incapable or unwilling to make the types of changes that are required to ensure more effective forms of social dialogue. .

Increased polarisation is an unfortunate hallmark of our engagements. We are also witnessing the organisational weakening and fragmentation within the labour and business constituencies on the one hand and on the other hand the lack of effective coordination within government.

The net effect is that Social Dialogue and tripartite based institutions like Nedlac are severely weakened. It is therefore extremely unfortunate that precisely when we NEED social dialogue the role and relevance of our institutions are under siege and rendered incapable of responding to the scale and urgency of the challenges at hand.

When we celebrated the dawn of democracy, many of us understood that our socio-economic legacy – as manifested in deep structural unemployment, extreme inequality, high levels of poverty and serious backlogs in social goods and services - would require a massive collective effort.

We struggled for and then negotiated an end to the political system of Apartheid. But many of us accepted that the socio- economic system of Apartheid was still intact and was going to require immense leadership resolve and commitment to overcome.

Fast forward 18 years and we find a society still mired in unemployment, poverty and inequality. Corruption is a scourge and social service delivery is faltering. Our economy is not growing fast enough at a time when the global economy is still struggling to recover. It is very likely that we will not reach the employment goals that we have set in the NGP and NDP.

We are at a crossroads: we can proceed to stumble along the same road and continue with baseless finger-pointing when things go wrong, or we can follow a new path leading to a new social consensus: A new vision for new times, which addresses our new challenges head-on. If nothing else, Marikana should have prompted serious soul-searching amongst all the social parties.

A successful South Africa depends mostly on the commitment and capacity of the actors who sit at the main table. It is also, if the truth be told, about what is on the table. What are the trade-offs? Who can commit to what? Who is prepared to make compromises in the interests of the greater good?

Building a new social consensus is going to require bold leadership, common sense, cool heads and a willingness to listen and make compromises. If we as the social partners are not prepared to do this, we are at risk of continuing down a path that at best produces more of the same or being caught up in a spiral of increased social conflict and possibly repression and a reversal of our democratic gains

Right now, we have an opportunity to rethink how we do business, how we govern and how we rebuild society. What this means for the Nedlac constituencies and South Africa as a whole, is that we all need to start thinking and more importantly acting and relating differently if we are to survive these most challenging times.