

# Collective bargaining at Numsa:

## insights from NBC

The core business of trade unions is to bargain for better wages and working conditions for their members. This is what the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) set out to achieve at its national bargaining conference (NBC) in Pretoria from 16 to 19 April 2013. **Elijah Chiwota** looks at what underpins collective bargaining at one of the Congress of South African Trade Union's (Cosatu) biggest affiliates.

**N**umsa meetings are almost always colourful – with delegates donning the red, yellow, black and white from the logo of the 320,000-strong union. Besides the colour, the delegates are also known for their no holds barred radical unionism – in the way they present their views on a number of socio-economic and political issues much to the chagrin of other unions as well as the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

Fittingly the NBC, attended by 450 delegates, took place under the theme: 'Redistribution of wealth now as demanded by the Freedom Charter'

'Our collective bargaining 2013 is taking place in the midst of a national crisis, caused by the failure to implement the Freedom Charter, in particular ownership and control of our national wealth,' said general secretary Irvin Jim.

Most of the documents in the conference pack highlighted demands on economic freedom, health, education, and housing for the working class, affordable and efficient public transport, as well as better policies on climate change and a socially owned energy sector.

Even the increasingly young shop stewards were quick to grasp the radical talk of Numsa, suggesting that the orientation they go through is intensive – one that instils the militant tradition of the union into the hearts of those learning the ropes.

Expectations from 'factories, smelters, auto and tyre manufacturing plants, car dealers, panel beaters and petrol stations are extremely high,' said Numsa president, Cedric Gina, adding that collective bargaining was 'among the core responsibilities of a trade union...The owners of production always want to exploit increasing profits from the work output of the workers, while workers want to be remunerated very well for their labour.'

'Whilst expectations were high, the NBC was an opportunity to learn from previous experiences,' said deputy general secretary, Karl Cloete. One such learning experience that came from the collective bargaining experience of 2010 was to make firm demands for workers while taking into account the economic environment

of a recession where jobs were getting lost. Therefore, making unrealistic promises on the part of the union was out of the question as this raised workers' expectations unnecessarily. Such expectations, if unfulfilled, would dent the image of the union, argued Cloete.

### WORKERS' DEMANDS

The principles of Numsa's collective bargaining were to 'close the apartheid wage gap and fight for equity and a living wage, democratise workplaces, reduce excessive pay of the bosses, and develop the skills of the workforce that was deprived of that development during apartheid.'

These principles were tied to making demands for the state to invest in manufacturing industries where most of the metalworkers were employed. 'We must use collective bargaining and our socio-economic demands and campaigns to secure the future of manufacturing, which is the future of our country and the future of metalworkers,' added Jim.

Numsa organises in the following industrial sectors: iron steel and

metal, electrical engineering and electrical/construction, lift and escalator, locksmith trade, plastics, automotive manufacturing, motor, tyre and rubber, battery manufacturing, scrap metal, base and special metal smelting and other metal-related industries. In sectors such as vehicle assembly plants including truck and buses, it is the only union. It also dominates tyre and rubber manufacturing.

On wage increases the NBC adopted demands for an increase of R3.22 for auto assembly so as to abide to the principle of equal pay for work of equal value. For auto assembly, tyre manufacturing, iron steel and base metals the demand will be for an increase of 20%.

In the motor industry, where Numsa has only 5,254 members at the end of March, an industry minimum of R6,000 was proposed, and for those earning above that figure, the proposed increase will be R30 per hour. The Good Year wage model was adopted as the preferred one instead of the generic wage model in the New Tyre Manufacturing and related sectors.

A decision was also made against pegging wages on the Consumer Price Index and going for a general increase instead – a strategy probably meant to cushion workers against unpredictable inflation fluctuations.

The principle was that wage levels would be negotiated and not based on minimums. Also agreed were that wage increases will be negotiated annually and that labour broking will be banned across all sectors. In the event of short-time work and temporary lay-offs, workers will be paid full wages. When there are disputes, these will be referred to negotiations or dispute resolution.

It was also recommended that workers' housing be looked into even if it meant that employers had to be forced to transfer the land they owned to workers.



*Numsa president Cedric Gina with labour minister Mildred Oliphant at the NBC.*

'All land owned by employers must be disclosed with such land transferred to the ownership and control of workers,' read a Numsa statement released after the conference. Calls were also made for increasing transport allowances in some sectors.

Numsa also called for six months paid maternity leave, skills training, and 'industry-based worker controlled medical aid schemes' as one of the strategies to move away from 'the yoke of private medical aid administrators.'

#### MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

The influence of trade unions in South Africa is a game of numbers for a lot of players. For Cosatu it means more revenue from the affiliate but also more influence in terms of the growing membership. The more Cosatu affiliates grow in numbers, the more the federation grows in influence. But this can only happen if members are not hopping from one Cosatu affiliate to another – a tussle that some have termed 'poaching'.

Responding to some media reports that Numsa was poaching

from other unions, Jim retorted: 'Workers are not rhino, they cannot be poached.'

Even politicians in the ANC recognise the political position of Cosatu because of its ability to mobilise and campaign for the ruling party during election years, and with 2014 beckoning, the federation becomes a useful ally indeed.

Buoyed by its recent growth, Numsa has a recruitment plan that is aimed at a target of 400,000 by 2016. But before this happens a lot needs to be done on the ground.

Some shop stewards complained that the turn-around time for attending to workers' grievances and requests should be reduced because some cases were taking over five years to be finalised. The union also had to instil confidence in some non-unionised workers who were reluctant to join unions for fear of victimisation from the employer.

#### METALWORKERS ON DIGITAL

On the technological front, the delegates are moving with the times. One item that a careful



*Delegates follow debates closely.*

eye would not miss from the conference tables was the ever-present i-Pad. However, it is also interesting to note that the new technology exists side by side with the thick paper file full of conference documents. This suggests that the union is still waiting for the day when the paper file will be replaced by digital or soft copies on the i-Pads. However, use of technology is not lost on the national office bearers who, in most instances, made PowerPoint presentations that were shown using overhead projectors.

On digital technology and Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Numsa, according to the *Numsa Organising, Campaigns and Collective Bargaining Strategy* booklet, believes that it 'offers an enabling environment for people in different areas to keep in touch with one another, hold discussions online, convene meetings and share documents. In the Numsa auto and tyre sectors, such is the case with the newly established Google Groups.'

'We need to ensure that we harness the benefits of social networking facilities and also entrench the use of ICT. ICT is particularly attractive to the younger generation of workers and continues to grow in importance. It is crucial that Numsa adapt – in order to align with the new generation of workers, their way of doing things and their expectations with regards to communication.'

### ECONOMIC POLICIES

For this national bargaining conference, positions on a number of social, political and economic issues were clearly spelt out and the National Development Plan (NDP) document was on the receiving end of Numsa wrath.

Jim said the NDP must be withdrawn because it is 'against the Freedom Charter and the interests of the working class and the poor' and protected 'the historic and vested interests of white monopoly and imperialist capital'.

Among other things, the NDP is accused of being unrealistic. 'It continues to promise us that redistribution will come after

growth when we know that growth can only come through redistribution.'

'It presents this false road as the basis for the gradual evolution of a "New South Africa". It is a right-wing document that will direct the wheels of history in the interests of the ruling class until 2030.'

With regard to youth employment, Jim called for the 'abandonment of the three-tier labour system' because it served the 'interests of capital'. Instead, quality jobs should be created for young people when they leave tertiary institutions. In this respect he called for the abandonment of the youth wage subsidy arguing that if implemented it would exploit young workers and lead to the retrenchment of permanent workers.

Labour brokers were castigated for not providing decent jobs, and that employers who violated the Employment Equity Act should face stiffer penalties. Jim also added that deregulation and exemptions that allowed employers to exploit workers by paying 'slave rates and giving no benefits at all to workers' should be removed. The introduction of a national minimum wage would also improve wages.

### CONCLUSION

What one concluded from the NBC and more so from the sector-specific commissions was the existence of a wealth of experience in collective bargaining, as negotiators walked the participants through the process. There were also highlights on what has been achieved thus far and where the efforts should be focused in the future. The whittling down of demands from long lists to shorter and manageable ones and also streamlining demands in terms of them being achievable were some of the positive outcomes of the NBC. It is also interesting to note that the radical union identity continued to be the one that Numsa preferred. **LB**