

Holding of Cosatu special congress

Unions want unity and action

In letters to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) president Sidumo Dlamini, unions are asking the federation to convene a special congress to discuss unity of purpose and the implementation of resolutions of the 11th National Congress that took place in 2012, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

At a press conference on 11 October Dlamini could not give exact dates as to when the special congress of the federation would take place, as requested by eight affiliates. He cited administrative matters that included finding the R12-million needed for the congress, booking the venue, finalising the agenda and other constitutional requirements.

Provision for a special congress is found in clause 3.3.2 of the Cosatu constitution as amended by the 9th Congress in 2006 and also by the central executive committee (CEC). Clause 3.3.2.1.2 allows, 'not less than one third of the affiliates in good standing [to] submit a written request to the general secretary for the attention of the president calling for the meeting'.

In letters in possession of the *South African Labour Bulletin* from the affiliates addressed to the president requesting the special congress, the agenda is as clear as daylight. Therefore, a lack of agenda can't be one of the reasons holding back announcing when this important congress will take place.

The affiliates are the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (Denosa), Food and Allied Workers

Union (Fawu), National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (Saccawu), South African Football Players Union (Safpu), South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) and the South African State and Allied Workers Union (Sasawu).

TENSIONS AND TANTRUMS

In fact the main agenda is built around the application by Fawu made on 3 September 2013. According to Fawu, CEC meetings were no longer serving any purpose as they have stopped being a platform for implementing resolutions of the 11th National Congress held in 2012. Instead the 'meetings have turned into platforms of complaints against and attacks on the general secretary [Zwelinzima Vavi]. As a result Cosatu, thus far, has not led a single mass campaign to take forward Congress resolutions'.

Fawu bemoans a situation where the CEC has become divisive.

'It is unthinkable that Cosatu's divisions will result in an outsourced process in which there would be facilitation towards unity on loosely defined ideological, political, organisational and administrative factors. In our view

it is impossible for the facilitation process to resolve these matters and to unite the federation. Only a special congress can deal with these matters and if need be, elect those prepared to carry forward adopted Cosatu resolutions,' writes Fawu.

Saccawu agrees with Fawu that the facilitation process 'gives a false hope' because 'the current debacle is fraught and/or riddled with tensions and tantrums' and therefore it was better to use 'Cosatu organisational instruments/tools'.

Although there is acceptance of the facilitation process by Charles Nupen and Petrus Mashishi and other former Cosatu officials Sydney Mufamadi, Makhulu Lwedaba, Alec Erwin, Enoch Godongwana and Mandla Gxanyana, the affiliates feel the special congress is the best platform because no meaningful debate is happening in the CEC.

Writes Safpu: 'The facilitated process to deal with the current organisational crisis, led by affiliate presidents and general secretaries has not been able to yield any positive results, instead divisions within the CEC, and Cosatu national office bearers have intensified'.

The current crisis can lead to Cosatu's death continues Safpu: 'If the current crisis in Cosatu is



Workers attend May Day Celebrations in Sharpeville.

not arrested, there is a real danger that the federation will go beyond being in a state of paralysis – which means death’.

Saccawu sees the CEC as beyond redemption, and that a special congress was the way to go. It argues: ‘... evident but divisive overtures and utterances that are tantamount to holding of the CEC at ransom whilst plunging the whole federation into paralysis, made us to reconsider whether or not under the circumstances the CEC would be in a position to rise above such personalities and egos; and had unfortunately arrived at painstaking but factually derived conclusion that it cannot’.

Saccawu adds that its shop stewards have expressed worry that, ‘the current state of the federation has rendered them worse than vulnerable, with the escalation of the labour brokerage and casualisation whilst the e-tolling double taxing or subtle broad daylight robbery scheme

is reaching completion with no massive dissenting voice.’

Cosatu campaigns against labour brokers and e-tolls, characterised by loud street marches in the last two years, have suffered major blows from the CEC in-fighting as there has been no opposing mass action when laws were signed in favour of these practices. This is very unlike Cosatu’s tradition of taking to the streets. Instead, odd press statements have been issued condemning labour broking and e-tolls with suggestions of mass action in the future. This muted response has fallen into the laps of critics who have been saying all along that the African National Congress (ANC) wants a Cosatu that is tame and one that can become the ruling party’s ‘labour desk’.

AGENDA

Fawu’s proposed agenda captures what all the other affiliates are raising. Therefore, it is most likely

that Saccawu will agree with Fawu’s proposed agenda for the special congress, which is as follows:

- ‘Reaffirmation or review of the 2012 National Congress resolutions
- Non-implementation of 2012 Congress resolutions and reasons for such
- The implementation plan of the Cosatu campaigns arising from such resolutions
- Election of new office bearers committed to Cosatu resolutions and campaigns.’

Numsa supports Fawu’s proposed special congress agenda and says so in its letter, adding that the removal of Vavi is not a recent development, but one which has been on the cards of some unions for some time.

‘In February and May 2013 certain affiliates such as the National Union of Mineworkers, National Education Health and Education Workers Union, South

'Evident but divisive overtures and utterances that are tantamount to holding of the CEC at ransom whilst plunging the whole federation into paralysis, made us to reconsider whether or not under the circumstances the CEC would be in a position to rise above such personalities and egos; and had unfortunately arrived at painstaking but factually derived conclusion that it cannot' – Saccawu

African Democratic Teachers Union, Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union, South African Transport and Allied Workers Union, Chemical Energy Paper Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union etc. made no bones about the fact that they wanted to have the democratically elected Cosatu general secretary removed at all cost. The so-called political and ideological postures... were drummed up as reasons and motivation enough to have comrade Vavi removed,' reads the Numsa letter.

The failure to implement resolutions of the last Cosatu congress is a chorus cited by almost all the affiliates calling for the special congress.

'We know that the Cosatu national office bearers have been unable to steer the federation towards the execution of these resolutions. Rather, Cosatu became stuck in a self-manufactured rapture detaining the entire federation from addressing the needs and aspirations of our members,

including lack of a well-coordinated living wage campaign,' writes Numsa.

On reasons why there should be a congress Denosa cites the 'failure of the federation to implement its own National Congress resolutions' and 'National Collective Bargaining, Organising and Campaigns resolutions' as well as 'relooking at the leadership of the federation (national office bearers) in terms of the mandate given to it by the 11th National Congress'.

CWU's demands are for 'unity and cohesion,' while Samwu calls for Vavi's reinstatement.

Sasawu feels that Cosatu is not listening when it raises issues. 'Our efforts to have stability within the federation fell on deaf ears... something which convinced us that in your radar screen there are no prospects of having sanity prevailing within the federation,' writes Sasawu.

Safpu's proposed agenda is also on implementing the last congress resolutions, unity and cohesion and 'building of a united, worker-controlled, mass based, and radical federation'. Safpu adds that because Cosatu was a worker-controlled federation its 'ultimate decision-making structure' was the congress and the special congress.

Therefore, if one were to do a consolidation of the proposed agendas, it might not be difficult to build all proposals onto the Fawu proposal, which is inclusive of what the other affiliates are demanding.

MEDIA INTEREST

The crisis at the 'Red House' – as Cosatu House is referred to by its members – has been covered

extensively by the media. Not surprisingly that sometimes the published news stories have not been well-received by the federation leadership. For example, at the press conference *The Sowetan* newspaper was blamed for 'distorting' the contents of a letter circulated to affiliates by the federation. Dlamini disputed that he had in that letter 'acceded' and 'bowed to pressure from affiliates'. In the letter, made available at the press conference, Dlamini said he would follow the Cosatu constitution to the letter and that he had asked Cosatu treasurer Freda Oosthuysen to look into the federation's coffers to see if there was enough money to meet the special congress expenses.

CONCLUSION

The demands for a special congress, which Dlamini said he will implement as per Cosatu's constitution, are based on demands to carry out the resolutions of the 11th National Congress and therefore there might not be a need to go through the formulation of new resolutions. To come up with a theme for the special congress, as is the tradition, is also not an impossible task. Maybe the only hurdle will be raising the R12-million required for the special congress, as it was not on the budget for 2013 according to the president. As mentioned at the meeting this was not Cosatu's first special congress, the first having been held in 1988 at the height of the apartheid crisis. Then as now, the federation of over two million members might be able to take this in its stride. ¹⁸



Cosatu treasurer Freda Oosthuysen to explore ways of making funds available for special congress.