

# How NUM avoided disaster at 14th Congress

This year the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) celebrated its 30th anniversary at its 14th National Congress. It was more than wine, song and dance, as NUM grappled with many issues, including leadership struggles and inroads by a rival union. But at the end of it all, NUM emerged an even stronger organisation, writes **Raphaël Botiveau**.

**W**hen NUM delegates come together for a National Congress or a Regional Conference, they often pick a song that sort of becomes the hit, or the anthem symbolising their gathering... This time, as South Africa's largest union convened its 14th National Congress, that of its 30th anniversary, delegates feared a disaster was underway and kept singing *Kodowa kodowa ena* as if trying to keep fate at bay and make sure their 'giant' organisation would come safe out of this milestone event.

The congress theme was 'Celebrating 30 years of unbroken revolutionary trade unionism struggle'.

For stakes were high when leaders from all levels of the organisation converged in Kempton Park, Johannesburg, from 23 to 26 May. The Congress was taking place at the fancy Emperors Place, a hotel, casino and convention resort, which led the union's founding general secretary, Cyril Ramaphosa, to remind delegates: 'You now hold conferences in these wonderful buildings, in classy hotels. When we started [in the 1980s] we used to hold a conference of this union throughout the night, [with] no sleeping. We would start at 4 or 5 o'clock and work throughout the night because we didn't have money or a place to sleep.'

From a night-long race against time, NUM congresses have now turned into genuine marathons at the union's own venues since the Emperors Palace belongs to Peermont, a group in which the Mineworkers Investment Company is the majority shareholder.

The outgoing leadership did not do things by halves: the congress welcomed hundreds of guests, including international ones from sister organisations in more than 20 countries. Delegates were addressed by the most prominent leaders including the president of South Africa and the African National Congress (ANC), Jacob Zuma, and his NUM counterpart Senzeni Zokwana who were introduced by the words of a praise poet.

President Zuma told delegates the congress was important since mineworkers 'are the engine of the economy.' He urged them to take an active part, as trade unionists, in the politics of the ANC and South Africa. If not, the president said, workers would be condemned to 'suffer forever'.

This was one of several reminders of the NUM's role in the ruling party, as well as a call for the union to take a first decisive step towards the ANC Mangaung Conference and ahead of congresses of the Congress of

South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in September and the South African Communist Party (SACP), which took place in July.

Blade Nzimande, the SACP general secretary, addressed the congress on the second day. He underlined the necessity of deepening transformation policies and stressed the part played by the SACP leadership deployed to cabinet over the past few years.

Delegates were addressed by Cosatu president Sdumo Dlamini on the third day. Before agreeing to speak Dlamini demanded the reinstatement of two employees of a labour broker contracted by the hotel in which the congress was taking place who had been fired. President Zokwana and general secretary Baleni then answered in a reality-TV like moment, one in which situations are solved live, that following on a phone call to the CEO of Peermont – who by the way is an indirect employee of the NUM, its majority shareholder – the two unfortunate employees had been reinstated.

Other ministers who spoke at the congress included Thulas Nxesi (Public Works), Malusi Gigaba (Public Enterprises) and Maite Nkoana-Mashabane (International Relations).

A gala dinner on the third day



Songs expressed the mood of the delegates at the congress.

was attended by the NUM former general secretary Kgalema Motlanthe, as well as by the union's former president, James Motlatsi. Guests were entertained by Zahara, since celebrating the union's 30 years also involved some partying.

In such a context, and backed by their august predecessors – Senzeni Zokwana by James Motlatsi and Frans Baleni by both Cyril Ramaphosa and Kgalema Motlanthe, it seemed unlikely that the outgoing leadership would lose the elections. The history of NUM and its present, which included a decisive electoral confrontation, were melted in such a way during this congress that it seemed present-day leaders were part of the pantheon of their forbearers, as shown in the documentary on the history of the NUM that was screened at the congress.

#### BALENI VS. KOMANE

In the leadership contest the question was *Bosso ke mang?* (who is the boss?) While the outgoing leadership was logically favoured by its position and by the special context of this congress, it also reinforced itself through the constant targeting of a semi-invisible inner enemy. This enemy was attacked without ever being named, yet all knew at the same time, the people targeted were the contenders of the outgoing team.

The elections were indeed contested and, most notably, outgoing deputy general secretary, Oupa Komane, stood against Frans Baleni, while Joseph Montisetsi, the regional secretary of Matlosana, was nominated against Senzeni Zokwana for the position of president. President Zokwana denounced a 'new tendency' in the union and the fact that some companies like Shiva Uranium, which it is to be reminded belongs to people close to President including his own son Duduzane Zuma and two representatives of the Gupta family, funded the campaign of some candidates in exchange for assurances that they would avoid future strikes.

One private medical scheme was also reported to be involved in such practices that allegedly comprised the provision of cars, venues for meetings, money for accommodation, petrol and food and even security guards that were present at the congress. It was also alleged that non-registered delegates were trying to enter congress helped by regions like PWV.

At some stage, the general secretary even threw in accusations of spying. 'At head office we are being monitored, our phones are bugged,' Frans Baleni alleged. He later told the story of a 'sell-out' in the struggle, an undercover policeman, who once infiltrated an Umkhonto we Sizwe base camp.

Eventually the 1,112 voting delegates decided through casting their ballots and their choice was clear: they renewed their confidence in the outgoing leaders, all of whom were generally re-elected with a comfortable margin of 60-40.

However, such allegations are serious and it seems that an investigation will be conducted shortly after congress, as requested by several regions. It is obviously preoccupying that private companies may be funding the campaign of some union leaders in what would be an obvious conflict of interests. Yet this also raises a question on how democracy can work practically in an organisation of more than 300,000 members such as the NUM.

While outgoing leaders can rely on the union's infrastructure for their campaigns, contenders also need resources to make their voices heard. Precise rules on fund-raising and campaigning, or even the creation of an internal funding mechanism for campaigns, could possibly be thought of in order to restrict the role of money and avoid situations of suspicion, as was the case in this congress.

Another risk is that while it is important to emphasise the continuity of the organisation, as done for instance by James Motlatsi when he recalled that 'unity has got its own

two twin sisters... discipline and respect,' one should always beware of promoting discipline at the expense of other issues. There is indeed a trend in organisations to laud unopposed elections as inherently more democratic. As the argument goes, the uncontested elections – ideally – illustrates the liveliness of a collective through engaging on ideas.

Power struggles are also part of the life of organisations because organisations are power and it is not surprising that leaders who have been present at national level for at least a decade were being contested. Issues of campaigning or the circulation of slates bearing the names of candidates should therefore also be de-dramatised since they were arguably always part of the union in one way or another. More importantly such a focus on the 'enemy from within' was also to some extent done at the cost of a more needed focus on the 'enemies from without'.

### STRONG UNION

In congress, as stated by Peter Bailey, the national chairperson for Health and Safety, who chaired most of the sessions, 'time is against us.' This meant that there was little space for regions to truly engage on crucial matters. One can here think of the major and renewed challenge posed to the NUM in the platinum industry in recent months by its rival Association of Mining and Construction Union (Amcu). While the problem was not evaded but addressed in several interventions, this national congress could have been the right place to reflect on the deep causes of this challenge – and NUM has proved in many instances it is able to self criticise and move forward – in order to design a comprehensive strategy involving all layers of the organisation to deal with it. Baleni suggested for instance at some point that the KwaZulu-Natal region had 'tips' to share regarding how to deal with Amcu. Yet they were never publically discussed by delegates. To that extent it was a pity that another item in the news concerning the

public disclosure of President Zuma's private parts on an artist's painting kept on coming back in speeches to sometimes even dominate debates.

Tackling this issue was necessary insofar as many felt it was a violation of human dignity and illustrated double standards in dealing with racism in South Africa. However, in doing so, the NUM congress also over focused on the person of Zuma, on the ANC, and failed in doing so to adequately address other issues directly relevant to mineworkers' lives and work or to the NUM.

Little or no time was hence dedicated to matters as crucial as the relationship between the union and ordinary members, strategies for collective bargaining (two questions that to some extent lie beneath the Impala crisis), the recruiting of new categories of skilled workers, or even the position of the youth in the NUM.

If the latter has been under consideration at national level through the launch of a Youth Structure/ Forum, it is a question that was touched by several regions in a way that suggested it is an important issue to address more in depth, including in the lower levels of the NUM; but national leaders keep on shying away from it afraid as they are of another potential Youth League scenario.

This being said one should not obscure the fact that Frans Baleni's Secretariat Report was generally welcomed as an excellent one. The picture given was that of a 200 staff strong organisation that keeps on investing in its members and its future. In terms of education for example, it was recalled that the NUM's bursary scheme produced 673 graduates since its inception, while the union has just bought a brand new training centre in Midrand, and is soon to establish a research institute 'much much bigger' than Cosatu's one in order to enhance its education and research capacities.

The NUM is today worth R267-million richer explained treasurer general David Macatha, which makes it Cosatu's largest contributor. Some lowlights underlined in Baleni's report regarded the escalation in legal costs

or the fact that head office has never seen such a level of election-related complaints since 1982, which he argued shows that 'there is leadership interest before capacity.'

The general secretary later confirmed the union's position on nuclear energy, which is no longer an option for the NUM, as well as being in favour of 'strategic nationalisation' in mining, which would also include a whole set of additional measures to better regulate the sector. If the renewal of the NUM leadership implies a vote in favour of continuity in the ANC, the resolution adopted on Mangaung remains vague and delays any final decision on leadership in the ANC to Cosatu's congress in September 2012.

Finally, and as opposed to what was implied in press reports, NUM's 14th National Congress proved a very disciplined, orderly and successful one. There was genuine anxiety on the part of many delegates during this contested election that their organisation could come out of congress divided and in bad hands. They can therefore be relieved that disaster passed its way.

NUM made it to its 30th anniversary and it seems promised to a bright future. One ought to recall, however, the fact that in the very same year in which NUM is celebrating its strength and success as an organisation, it is experiencing at the same time one of its biggest challenges in years through the crisis in Impala and Lonmin. From a certain point of view this is also a welcome wake-up call – a sad one though since violence and death are at play – since strength is at risk when it remains unopposed for too long, a call to react and fight back on stronger bases in order to convince and regain lost members. <sup>LB</sup>

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