

# Resisting colonisation of union lifeworld

## View from Numsa 9th Congress

Trade unions such as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) are always defending the rights of workers and calling for progressive economic policies. By so doing, they are defending the union lifeworld from colonisation by capitalism, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

**T**he spaces in which trade unions like Numsa operate are vibrant. Among other things, this is where ideas are contested. There are also spaces for organising and building the power of the union and the working class. In addition to this, the unions lay out plans on how they intend to improve the services that they provide to members.

Political power is another dynamic if one takes into account Tripartite Alliance politics of the African National Congress (ANC), Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). This is why unions are always questioning some government policies that they see as going against the interests of the workers.

In these spaces, trade unions fight against the domination of neo-liberal economic policies. In the South African context, these policies are championed by the government and market forces.

These contested spaces are part of what make up the union lifeworld. According to Jurgen Habermass a lifeworld is an area of everyday life in which actions must be carried out in a way that involves

communication and interaction.

According to Gemma Edwards, a lifeworld is made up of three parts. These are society (solidarities, social ties and networks), personality (personal identities including skills and competencies that have been acquired through socialisation) and culture (shared traditions, knowledge, meanings and memories).

Participation at meetings such as congresses link up workers to international, national and local working-class struggles. Young workers are also socialised into the values of the trade union and this helps to build their capacity for action when they take part in union activities.

Trade union culture is also celebrated through remembering past leaders such as Mbuyiselo Ngwenda, John Gomomo, Bimba Manqabashana, Jabulile Ndlovu, Mthuthuzeli Tom and Vincent Mabuyakhulu. Others such as Moses Mayekiso, now with the opposition Congress of the People, are chastised and asked to come back 'home' to the ANC.

Events such as Numsa's Silver Jubilee Celebration Rally held at the Curries Fountain stadium in Durban,

amid traditional dance and fanfare, cements this culture.

Government and market forces, called the system world by Jurgen Habermass, are always attempting to dominate and dictate the pace of trade unions. If they succeed in this, then trade unions and the workplace become colonised. Once this happens, the unions become tame and are mainly restricted to the service side of things where their only role is around wages, benefits and working conditions. This means that they will then stop being a political force and therefore will not be a political voice.

Colonisation erodes the communicative forms of interaction such as worker mobilisation for strikes, demonstrations, collective bargaining, and active involvement in politics as seen in the union lifeworld. This worker participation is replaced by actions that are controlled by money and power especially through the capitalist market place.

Speaking at the congress Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi alluded to this when he said there was always a problem when leaders spoke as if they had a 'hot potato' in their mouths. This muddled their



*Occasional singing added flavour to debates at the congress.*

arguments and made it difficult to those listening to understand what they were saying.

However, the trade union fight back against neo-liberal economic policies can be seen as an attempt to resist the colonisation of the union lifeworld by capitalism.

The union lifeworld is alive to its fullest at trade union congresses such as Numsa's 9th National Congress. At this congress, the union did not only oppose capitalism (colonial, apartheid and post-apartheid), but found an alternative in socialism hence the call for a 'Socialist Republic of South Africa'.

Numsa is not alone in this call, but is supported by some confederations such as one of its guests at the congress, the World Federation of Trade Unions, which pronounced that 'socialism is the answer'.

To achieve this, at least in its structures for now, Numsa, which describes itself as Marxist-Leninist, organises the working class as a conscious force that should go beyond trade union consciousness.

According to Numsa's *Book 2a, Secretariat Report: Political, Socio-economic and International*: 'The working class will never win

the battle against capital unless its activism moves beyond the shop floor into the broader social terrain. That is why we should strive to link-up with reactive working class structures that operate in the terrain of community and other struggles.'

Numsa argues that the class nature of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in South Africa should be looked at carefully. 'Our view is that the NDR has been derailed precisely because the working class has not been its leading force. In the current situation, the working class is awakening to this reality.'

### SOCIETY

Numsa has local and international networks. Therefore solidarity, social ties and networks are established at different levels. The analysis in the congress literature showed the union's position on various international issues such as the global economic crisis.

According to Numsa the global economic crisis is a crisis of capitalism, which resulted from the 'neo-liberal restructuring of the workplace and society, [and] the rising dominance of money over

all other forms of capital...' The financialisation of the economy led to money being taken away from productive sectors of the economy that created jobs such as manufacturing.

According to the general secretary, Irvin Jim, the current macro-economic policies were overly against the working class. The alternative is to reduce interest rates, drop inflation targeting favoured by the Reserve Bank of South Africa and devalue the rand. Additionally, controls should be brought back to deal with capital flight while industries should be protected through tariffs.

Jim also said nationalisation of land, mines and other strategic resources is a policy of the ANC that came from the Freedom Charter and other documents such as the Strategy and Tactics of the Morogoro Conference. The two documents called for the equitable distribution of the country's wealth.

The National Planning Commission's (NPC) role was also put under the spotlight as there were fears that it was operating outside the Polokwane mandate. 'The NPC was not conceptualised as a super-national/state structure to

work outside the framework of the governing party.’

Analyses in its reports were disputed. ‘If the Diagnostic Report transformed symptoms into causes we see no reason why the draft National Development Plan and Vision produced by the NPC can be logical...’

The congress was addressed by international, government and union officials. South Africa’s President Jacob Zuma once more invited trade union leaders to join the ANC at the highest decision-making levels.

Minister of Trade and Industry Rob Davies talked about the 2nd Industrial Policy Action Plan and how it would create jobs, while Minister of Economic Development Ebrahim Patel explained government’s vision for economic development as presented in the New Growth Path.

However, the reception was not so warm for Minister of Higher Education and South African Communist Party (SACP) general secretary, Blade Nzimande, whose speech was delayed for a few minutes as delegates sang revolutionary songs to show their displeasure on what the metalworkers said was SACP support for e-tolling in Gauteng Province. Delegates also questioned how ‘socialisation’ of the means of production could be separated from nationalisation. These deeper analytical skills probably come from workers’ exposure to debates at workshops, through training or acquired skills through membership of Numsa. Therefore the workers can no longer be taken for granted.

One delegate likened the congress to a political mine field where it was important to walk carefully or risk being blown up.

## PERSONALITY

Growing membership indicates that the union is providing a satisfactory service to its members, as shown by the membership survey by the

Society, Work and Development Institute of the University of the Witwatersrand. According to the survey the average age of a member is 39, and therefore Numsa is arguably a union of young metalworkers.

Numsa has been able to bargain on behalf of its members and also to act as the voice of workers to employers.

It is also a union that not only ‘services’ members but ‘organises’ them as well. Thus the union effectively engages in collective bargaining and takes up grievances against employers. The survey concluded that Numsa builds ‘solidarity and working-class power through defending existing rights and by making new gains (that benefit workers)’.

Another part of Numsa’s personality is found in the proposed strike fund, which will provide support to Numsa members when they go on strike or are locked out. ‘The Numsa strike fund not only helps its members and their families pay the bills during strikes, the fund also strengthens the union’s bargaining position by sending a clear message to employers that they can’t starve Numsa members into surrender.’

Therefore, the strike fund ‘provides incentive for employers to negotiate in good faith instead of trying to provoke strikes. The strike fund will ensure that every Numsa member can count on strike pay when they are forced to walk the line to get the wages, working conditions and respect they deserve.’

Although elective congresses are explosive, this was not the case at this congress as most positions were not contested. President Cedric Gina, 2nd deputy president Christine Olivier, general secretary Irvin Jim and deputy general secretary Karl Cloete were unopposed. Those elected were 1st deputy president Andrew Chirwa and national treasurer Mphunzi Maqungo.

## CULTURE

Numsa has a rich history and its ideology and politics refer to this background. There is even a proposal to record the history of its veterans, some of whom have since resigned from the trade union movement to pursue other interests. The photographic exhibition at KwaMuhle Museum during the period of the congress and the book launch of Kally Forrest’s *Metal that will not bend* attests to efforts by Numsa to preserve its valuable past.

Tyoty James, Cosatu 1st deputy president, recognised this in his speech to the congress: ‘Metal workers have always been a leading detachment of the trade union movement. Numsa and its many predecessors – Metal and Allied Workers’ Union, Motor Industry Combined Workers Union, United Metal Mining and Allied Workers Union of South Africa and National Automobile and Allied Workers’ Union – were at the centre of the revival of the democratic movement in the early 1970s.’

They led the historic 1972/3 Durban strikes, built the Federation of South African Trade Unions in 1979. They played a central role in forging the United Democratic Front in 1983 and building our giant union federation Cosatu, launched here in Durban in December 1985.’

## CONCLUSION

Numsa’s 9th National Congress can be seen as a platform where the union defended its lifeworld: society, personality and culture. Through this defence the union presented its strategies to members on broader working-class politics. It also proposes the strengthening of its members through capacity development in skills and political consciousness. It was also a platform for reaffirming its politics and values, as has been built by its forbears. <sup>18</sup>