

Special national congress:

Numsa goes for abstention

Listening carefully to shop stewards attending the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa)'s special national congress (SNC) in Boksburg in December 2013, one felt that the union had reached its *gatvol* moment not only with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu)'s central executive committee (CEC), but also with Tripartite Alliance partners: the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). It was a congress of angry songs with *voetsak* making it into the lyrics. When it came to resolutions most of them were no-holds-barred, writes **Elijah Chiwota**.

When presenting the findings of the 2012 Shop Steward Survey at the Gordon Institute of Business Studies in Johannesburg last year, Edward Webster used the metaphor of marriage in relation to union participation in the Alliance. He painted four scenarios: to stay in a relationship in which unions were subordinate and integrated into the ANC, remain in an abusive relationship where there is domestic violence, go for divorce and form an oppositional labour party, or simply abstain.

Of these options it appears Numsa, whose membership stood at 338,718 in December 2013, has gone for abstention. That is so if one takes into account the resolution not to campaign for the ANC in elections to be held later this year. This is a radical departure from a past tradition of giving full support to the ANC. Then the union asked its members to 'swell the ranks' of the ruling party but it seems since the SNC this is now history.

COSATU SNC

Numsa was miffed by Cosatu's failure to convene a SNC as requested by its nine affiliates and decided to withhold paying its subscriptions until the congress was held. That request remained valid as only two of the nine affiliates were said not to be in 'good standing', meaning that they had fallen behind payment of their dues to the federation, but the remainder still met the constitutional requirement of one-third.

Describing Cosatu as 'paralysed' the SNC said the federation was divided into two camps: one fighting 'for socialism and against neo-liberalism' and the other for a 'labour desk of the ANC' that supported neo-liberalism. The SNC argued that this turned Cosatu into a 'yellow federation'. From these arguments one sees opposing ideological approaches to unionism between the camps.

SAMWU'S SUPPORT

The SNC received support from the South African Municipal Workers

Union (Samwu) among others. Said Samwu in a message: 'The Special Congress is also taking place when our beloved Federation Cosatu is in the midst of a paralysing and divisive crisis. A crisis we believe is a result of the struggle of contending class forces. At its sharpest, the struggle in Cosatu is between those who want to see Cosatu as a clear independent and unambiguous champion of the working class and the poor, and those who prefer Cosatu to be reduced to nothing more than a glorified labour desk'.

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Not all unions agree though with Numsa's analysis. For instance, the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) strongly objected to Numsa views.

'Given the media parade ahead of this meeting, it is no exaggeration to say that the final outcome of this union's special congress is underwhelming, amounting to no more than a spectacle of a public charade of militancy and a political bluff. A trade union that confuses itself for the working class party is bound to commit this kind of political cowardice in its attempt at rebellion.

... they convened a SNC to publicly rebuke the ANC, lament about the SACP and rebel against Cosatu and as a way forward proposed a liberal abstentionist position on the 2014 elections. This campaign of vilification against the Alliance is becoming tedious, and Numsa should realise that they can give themselves good reviews without demonising and insulting everyone'.

Furthermore, Nehawu wants action. 'We expect the federation to take action against this union's leadership; as they have blatantly

undermined the standing decisions of Cosatu for far too long. We are seriously disturbed that Numsa is now threatening to march against our own federation, whilst at the same time promising to forge an oppositionist 'united front' with a vigilante union that is [the] Association of Mining and Construction Union and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) tenderpreneurs. In this regard, Nehawu and other affiliates will be left with no choice but to defend our federation against this 'united front', and will be there to welcome Numsa marchers at the Cosatu building'.

However, according to Numsa, the Cosatu crisis had to be understood in terms of the history of the federation including the unity talks during its formation, its strategies and programmes as well as 'shifting class composition and values, concluded the SNC. This shifting class composition has been analysed by Sakhela Buhlungu as a contributory factor to the 'social distance' between union leaders and the general membership - a development that the SNC said caused 'splinters' and 'fragmentation'.

SUPPORT FOR VAVI

Proceedings came to a halt when Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, on forced 'special leave' and facing charges from the federation. According to the *Mail & Guardian*, the nine charges range from improper recruitment and having an affair with a junior Cosatu employee, use of the federation's credit card for personal expenses to breach of his suspension by posting on social media and addressing meetings.

However, Vavi walked into the plenary session to give a memorial lecture in honour of former Numsa leader, Mtutuzeli Tom, who passed on in 2010, undoubtedly showing the overwhelming support that he enjoys from Numsa. This is not surprising though as Numsa and the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) have been some of Vavi's staunch supporters since his suspension in August 2013 and have been calling for the charges to be dropped.

For instance, Numsa has always been on his side as it felt that the plot to oust the outspoken Vavi has been on the cards for some time and that the CEC was simply opportunistic when it took

that drastic decision. As part of its sanctions on the issue Numsa announced that it will stop paying subscriptions to Cosatu until the federation's special national congress is held.

NEO-LIBERAL ANC

Numsa's line of argument, consistent for some time, has been that the ANC continued to implement anti-working class neo-liberal economic policies similar to the discredited Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy. The National Development Plan (NDP) and policies of the South African Reserve Bank were seen in the same vein of skirting around poverty, unemployment and inequality. Instead the union favoured an economic policy framework built around the Freedom Charter (1955) and promoting such policies as the nationalisation of mines and beneficiation of minerals. It moaned the economic policies of the ANC which continue 'to duck the question of how to fundamentally change property relations in the country.

Concludes Numsa: 'The ANC has been captured by representatives of an enemy class. It has adopted the strategic plan of that class. Its leadership has shown that it will not let the small issue of democracy get in the way of defending its control. As well as the continued poverty of the majority of the working class, the result of this has been the slaughter of workers.'

With regard to the ANC the abstention included not endorsing the ANC for the 2014 elections, but leaving it up to the members to decide. Additionally, Numsa would also stop contributing finances to the Cosatu/SACP political levy. Some of the reasons for the abstention include the treatment of labour as a lesser partner. 'The treatment of labour

as a junior partner within the Alliance is not uniquely a South African phenomenon. In many post-colonial and post-revolutionary situations, liberation and revolutionary movements have turned on labour movements that fought alongside them, suppressed them, marginalised them, split them, robbed them of their independence or denied them any meaningful role in politics and policymaking.'

Webster develops a similar argument in *SALB* 32.1 and the current Numsa position might fit in the rejection of what he described as the second phase of political engagement by unions. 'The second phase begins with independence and the introduction of state led projects which rapidly expanded public sector jobs. During this phase formal union rights were often protected in theory but in practice unions were subordinated to dominant parties, losing an autonomous capacity to intervene politically'. The second phase sees unions' role as 'developmental' rather than 'representational'.

On representing workers Numsa felt that Cosatu was not doing enough. Furthermore, Numsa has lodged a section 77 application against the Employment Tax Incentive Act, signed into law last year, in which it argues that the law threatens workers, decent work and living wages.

ON SACP

Apparently the harshest words were reserved for the SACP whom Numsa said was no longer playing the 'vanguard' role. as the party's attack on the union was relentless. In presenting the Secretariat Report, Numsa general secretary, Irvin Jim said the SACP did not have 'a revolutionary programme for the struggle for socialism in South Africa'. He added that instead of organising workers behind it, the SACP focused on attacking Numsa.

SNC response was not surprising as it came on the heels of a media spat between Numsa and the party in which scorn swung from one end to the other. For example, the union's leadership was referred to as 'Irvin Jim and his clique' in media statements. Among other things, the SACP accused the Numsa leadership of benefitting from the union's investment companies and therefore not having workers' interests at heart. Instead, they were simply after profits from union businesses. According to the SACP the union leadership stood for 'self-interested opportunism in practice'. This was further from the truth, replied the leadership during many discussions at the SNC which attributed the attacks to differences arising from the SACP uncritical support of the NDP and e-tolls among other unpopular government policies.

CONCLUSION

The Numsa SNC was a departure from how trade unions, especially Cosatu affiliates, have defined their role within the Tripartite Alliance. This can also be seen as a fall-out with the ANC leadership that emerged after the Polokwane Conference in 2007. The abstention posture at the congress was complemented by other resolutions such as one calling for the resignation of President Jacob Zuma over the R200-million plus upgrade at his Nkandla rural home in KwaZulu-Natal province, paid from tax payers' money.

Another resolution on Marikana called for the resignation of national police commissioner, General Riah Phiyega and an investigation into 'who pulled the trigger or who gave instruction for the murder of workers in Marikana but would also investigate the root causes of the massacre such as the persistent migrant labour system and super exploitation of labour by capital in South Africa'. ¹⁸