

COSATU special congress

a wake-up call for worker control

In his opening address to the COSATU special congress, held from 18 to 20 August, COSATU's then acting president, Peter Malepe, said the challenge for the congress was to provide the federation with a short and implementable programme, not a bible.

He said there had been a decline in services to members over the past decade. This resulted from a decrease in resources committed to developing shopstewards – 'the backbone of the trade union movement'. There was also not enough focused development of officials and those in leadership. Malepe added: 'In a situation where nobody is equipped adequately, the lines of responsibility become blurred. The organiser becomes a troubleshooter, running like a beheaded chicken to workplaces to represent members in disciplinary cases when that is the role of a shopsteward. A treasurer spends hours in trying to balance financial books when that is the role of an accountant. The general secretary represents members in arbitration cases or spends hours writing minutes when that is the role of a bureaucrat.'

Malepe also said that COSATU was losing some of its traditions that made it 'the giant of the 1980s and 1990s'. He said: 'Central to this is the fact that increasingly we attach no importance to worker control, report-back and mandates. Leadership thinks that it is a strength to

Andries Bezuidenhout reports on discussions around servicing and organising at the COSATU special congress.

take decisions without even checking the thinking of second layer leadership and membership. Increasingly, leadership takes decisions and then does not even have the decency of reporting back to those they represent. This happens at all levels, including amongst shopstewards. As this takes hold, the gap between all these layers of leadership widens. As the gaps widen we begin to rely heavily on pamphlets, posters, television, radio and print media to communicate our decisions to members.'

In his address, Malepe said he was not mentioning those issues to ring alarm bells, but to signal 'a wake-up call to every leader, every official, every shopsteward and every member that the consolidation of COSATU and its repositioning will not happen if we do not tackle these weaknesses'. This call highlights one of the main aims of the congress – considering practical steps to take forward a process of organisational renewal.

But in the end this issue seemed to receive less attention than was intended. Instead, discussions on resolutions and

declarations were overshadowed by the public sector wage dispute, job loss resulting from tariff reforms, the liquidation of ERPM, and the media coverage of Terror Lekota's address to the congress. The preoccupation with these immediate concerns is important, but it illustrates the dilemma. On the one hand, COSATU and its affiliates have to deal with more and more pressing matters. Immediate demands are made on their time. They have to deal with complex issues, such as trade negotiations, workplace restructuring, privatisation, and their own investment companies. On the other hand, when these immediate issues are dealt with on a crisis management basis, this has the potential to increase reliance on officials and experts, and decrease popular participation, shopsteward involvement and worker control (which made COSATU strong in the first place).

Indeed, a recent survey of COSATU members shows that there is already a change in attitude towards the role of shopstewards. Almost half the people surveyed between the ages of 18 and 25 feel that shopstewards can 'represent workers' interests as they see fit'. Older workers still see worker control as important. More than half the members who are older than 35 years feel that 'shopstewards can only do what the

membership tells them to do'.

Reasons

What are the reasons for some movement away from the tradition of worker control (other than the reasons stated by Malepe)? What are the reasons for unions facing greater organisational challenges? The issue is certainly complex, but some reasons can be highlighted.

The independent unions that emerged in the 1970s were built on the tradition of worker control. Unionists were very careful to build shopfloor structures that could last. They knew from experience that trade unions that were not accountable to their members could easily be destabilised, especially in the context of the apartheid state.

These unions were also developing the basis for a society based on participative democracy. They therefore supported democratic decision-making as a fundamental principle. Union membership was also relatively small in numbers and it was therefore easier, on a practical level, to have regular report-backs and involve all members in decision-making. But unionists also knew that unions would be strong when they provided real benefits for their members. Workers won struggles for recognition and decent wages. It was clear

COSATU survey: views on mandates issued to shopstewards (%)

When you elect a shopsteward, s/he...

Age	...can represent your interests as s/he sees fit	...can only do what the membership tells him/her to do	...has the overall interests of the organisation in mind
18-25	47,2	27,8	25,0
26-35	35,3	42,2	22,5
36-45	28,1	50,0	21,9
46-55	22,1	57,1	20,8
56-65	14,3	64,3	21,4
Total	30	50	20

Source: Wood, G. 1999.



Worker control makes unions strong.

for them who the enemies were: the bosses and the government.

Of course, since then, several things have changed. Unions have become much larger in terms of membership. The average size of a union affiliated to COSATU is now more than 100 000 members. Eight affiliates have more than 100 000 members and four of these have more than 200 000 members. Growing membership has meant that unions have employed more officials and that there is a stricter division of labour among officials. This growth presents a danger – unions may become 'bureaucratised' and officials may become removed from membership.

Unions have also become involved in policy-making at an industry and a national level. The issues discussed at these levels are often very complex and the processes often require quick responses from union representatives. This makes mandating a very difficult process.

The difficulty in the mandating process is complicated by the complex relationship between government, the

ANC and labour. Since the election of the ANC into government, and the involvement of COSATU in the alliance, it has become less clear how and when to support or contest issues than was the situation with the apartheid government. Government has delivered on issues such as electricity, telephones and water. But there is considerable disagreement between labour and government on issues such as privatisation, public sector restructuring, and policy on trade and import tariffs. This complicates the forms of solidarity built when the struggle for socialism was tied up to anti-apartheid struggles. The fact that the alliance seems to work behind closed doors and at high levels at times, also makes getting mandates more difficult.

The democratisation process has also opened up opportunities for union leaders to enter other spheres of leadership. Many union leaders have gone into national, provincial and local government. Others have gone into business, and some have joined union investment companies.

Companies are recruiting shopstewards into management. This movement of leadership complicates local solidarity and impacts on branch-level politics. The position of a shopsteward becomes more contested than in the past. Workers may think that some shopstewards make themselves available for the position to be recruited into management. It also means that many of the new shopstewards may not be as experienced as those who no longer can or wish to be shopstewards.

The increased casualisation of work also impacts on how unions organise members. Casual, temporary and subcontract workers cannot usually pay union dues on a regular basis. Unions have often not organised these workers. As a result, tensions between casual workers and permanent workers may exist - especially when casuals are seen as undercutting permanent workers' wages or when casuals work as scabs and are seen as undermining union action. These divisions undermine workplace solidarity and organisation.

All these factors place worker control and organisation under pressure.

Debating servicing

There seemed to be a general acceptance at the special congress that unions need to work on servicing members. This is emphasised by the proposed slogan for the upcoming recruitment campaign: *Every worker a COSATU member, Organise, service and fight for your rights*. However, delegates debated whether:

- servicing should be part of a recruitment campaign;
- a narrow focus on servicing would lead to unions becoming 'client based' and less democratic.

Some delegates argued that a recruitment campaign was about organising new members, not servicing existing members. They therefore wanted the word 'servicing' to be removed from the slogan. While congress took a decision to adopt the slogan, I got the impression that this issue will be debated more in the future.

Some delegates argued that a narrow focus on servicing runs the risk of servicing becoming something that unions do for members on a client basis. Membership of a union may become nothing more than taking out insurance to

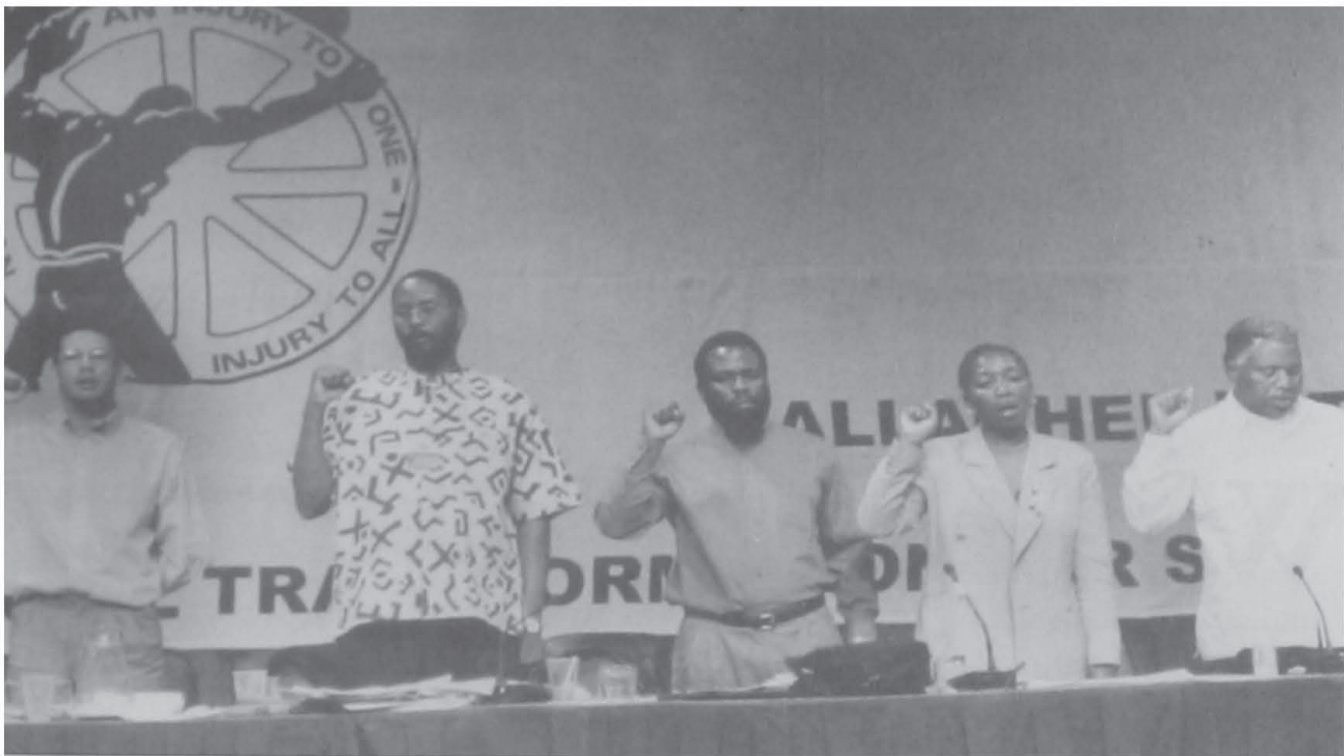
Extracts from the declaration on organisational renewal

Adopted by COSATU special congress, 20 August 1999

As part of the federation's organisational renewal priorities the following are targeted for successful implementation:

- The annual recruitment campaign to organise non-COSATU workers into the appropriate affiliate.
- To develop new education materials for the effective delivery of education for new shopstewards and second and first layer leadership.
- To ensure that shopsteward elections encourage women leadership and deepens membership participation and worker control.
- To review collective bargaining strategies

- and policies in every affiliate to ensure that gender demands are accommodated.
- To conduct, in every affiliate, a review of recognition agreements and audit them against gains made in the LRA.
- To revive the Health, Safety and Environment campaign by having a focus month on health and safety in the workplace and to elect and train health and safety committees in each workplace.
- To require a report at every structural meeting of the federation and affiliates on the implementation of adopted resolutions.
- To organise the unemployed and set up an advice desk for the unemployed in the short term.
- To organise the informal sector.



COSATU committed itself to organisational renewal.

cover legal action against an employer. Workers would become customers of unions, not members – as has happened in many unions in North America. Only now are these unions realising that their 'narrow servicing' business unionism model should have been adapted to an 'organising' model.

The future

Some theorists believe that trade unions go through cycles of militancy and growth, followed by cycles of bureaucratisation and decline. These theorists would predict a cycle of decline for COSATU with a decline in worker control and increased 'bureaucratisation'. Malepe warned against this in his opening address.

COSATU's special congress signals that the trend towards bureaucratisation, weakening organisation and a decline in worker control may not happen rapidly. As the highest decision-making body of COSATU, the congress took decisions on shopsteward training, staff development, shopsteward elections and leadership

development. It also made recommendations to establish defined portfolio commissions. The fact that delegates are debating servicing shows that the path North American unions took is not inevitable. The fact that delegates discussed worker control, mandates, report-backs and commitment to the movement gives hope that delegates will go back to their workplaces and breathe new life into their structures. However, because of the many other burning issues discussed at the congress, the programme of action did not emphasise organisational issues. Also, optimism must be contained given that many of the delegates who spoke were in fact officials and not workers. ★

References

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