

Worker rights & trade union unity in South Africa



Photo: William Motlala/COSATU

*CUNNINGHAM NGCUKANA**, general secretary of the National Congress of Trade Unions (NACTU) speaks at the COSATU Congress

I wish to convey my sincere gratitude to COSATU for extending an invitation to NACTU, and I believe that this gesture augers very well for future co-operation and more importantly, trade union unity in our country.

You are holding your Congress at a critical time in the history of our struggle and our country. It is no longer an issue whether apartheid will go or not but what will replace the existing order.

The concern of the trade

union movement is the rights of workers now and in the future. The trade union movement, with COSATU an important component of the movement, has played an important role as a locomotive of the struggle for National Liberation.

Workers have been killed, maimed and imprisoned as part of this struggle and therefore they do not expect to be used as ladders to political power but want to share in the gains made out

of the National Liberation struggle.

I would therefore share with you important workers rights that we believe in NACTU are essential to carry the struggle beyond apartheid. We believe that the end of apartheid will not mean the end of exploitation and other economic woes workers face until a socialist order is established where the working class will be in control of its destiny.

* Ngcukana (above left) clasps hands with COSATU's Jay Naidoo as the Congress sings after his speech

Rights of workers

The following rights are a pre-requisite and should be enshrined in the constitution and given legislative effect. I wish to emphasize the question of legislative effect as many people believe that having rights enshrined in the constitution is enough.

Many repressive states have these rights enshrined in their constitutions, but do not have mechanisms whereby people can exercise these rights. They end up as a decoration of the constitution, and we should avoid having a beautiful flower when we can not even smell its scent. The following rights are the basic worker rights that the trade union movement should fight for now, and after National Liberation has been attained, to pave the way for the attainment of a socialist order.

■ 1. Political and Civil Rights

Every person, irrespective of race, colour, creed or sex, should have the right to vote and be voted for into the political institution of the land. A corollary of this is that every person should have the right to form and belong to a political party of his or her own choice.

This right, as every right, has to have a limit in that it should be underlined by non-racialism, as racists should have no place in the future society. Without political and civil rights, the working class has limitations in influencing the political direction of the country and in forming political parties

that would serve its class interests.

■ 2. Freedom of expression

This is another basic right that we should fight for. Free flow of ideas and information is essential for any democratic society. The suppression of this right affects the ideological development of the working class, as has been the case when the Nationalist Party banned almost all Marxist-Leninist literature and bombarded us with capitalist propaganda. However, as we all know, they failed - as workers and our people know that what the oppressors are against is good for them.

■ 3. The right to strike and picket

■ 4. The right to form and belong to trade unions of our own choice without interference by the state and employers.

This right gives the workers absolute power to control their own organisations and to decide on what direction their organisations should take. It is an internationally recognised right by the ILO. Financing of trade unions by the South African Police to be against sanctions and socialism is a violation of this right.

■ 5. The right to education and training

The denial of training to workers is a deliberate capitalist ploy to ensure cheap labour and huge profits and to undermine the collective power of the working class.

This makes workers to be easily replaced. Skills are an important component of our collective power to strike back in the struggle to improve our standard of living.

■ 6. The right to a healthy and safe working place

Workers are not machines but human beings. Their lifespan depends on the environment within which they work and the working conditions. This right must be protected to ensure that workers are not maimed in pursuit of profits or leave their children as orphans.

Workers' organisation and unity

I have mentioned the most important rights. The list is not exhaustive. To ensure these rights, our weapon is organisation and unity. We should not expect to be given rights on a platter, even by liberation movements who we are fighting side by side with us to day to win our freedom. Our alliance with them can be temporary and limited to the attainment of National Liberation and they can turn against workers.

Namibian workers know better. After National Liberation each social class has its own social aims and it is inevitable that we will clash with some of the social classes we have aligned with to overthrow white domination. Our defence is our organisation, unity and struggle as workers.

I should also stress, that

we need also to produce a leadership with commitment to the working class, vision and imagination that should be able to interpret situations for the workers at each and every turn so that they can give direction to our movement. I am confident that this Congress will do this.

Relation between liberation movements and trade unions

The fundamental question is how to have these rights implemented. This raises the question of the relation between liberation movements and trade unions.

NACTU believes that, as we are in the same trenches with liberation movements, we should be able to influence them to be biased towards the workers. This brings in the 'two hats' debate which is a subject of discussion the world over. I believe that, irrespective of the position we have taken, the matter will not be settled for a long time. People must accept that time will resolve the matter, but we must continue debating in a comradesly spirit.

The central issue, however, is not two hats, but how to ensure that our demands are included in the political programmes of our liberation movements without tampering with our independence.

We need to encourage our membership to be involved in progressive political organisation and use the Patriotic Front to put forth this demand.

The Summit on Workers

Rights which was mooted by COSATU and NACTU must involve all progressive liberation movements so that they can take cognisance of our demands.

Lastly, having had international solidarity in fighting for these rights we must remember that solidarity is a two-way process.

We must assist trade unions in Southern Africa to achieve these rights, and put forth to the Liberation Movements that trade with countries that trample on trade union rights will not be possible. With our collective strength, I am confident that this can be achieved. We owe our brothers in our trade union movement a lot for the assistance they have given us to gain our strength that must reverberate throughout the continent.

South African trade union unity

Comrade Chairperson, NACTU believes in one federation in one country and in the unity of the working class, and that it is an indictment on us, both COSATU and NACTU, for not having achieved that. However it is one thing to believe in something and another to move from where we are to attain unity.

The political situation that has made the divisions is changing, and we believe that we should be able to move towards eventual unity, as the division of the working class is a luxury we cannot afford. We believe that to attain trade

unity, we should transcend parochial political positions and unite workers on the basis of working principles and interests.

This we can achieve if we all believe in non-affiliation to political organisation and create a federation that can accommodate individual political affiliation of workers but united by common working class interests.

The co-operation that exists between COSATU and NACTU has to be strengthened, and interaction amongst our affiliates encouraged. As part of a contribution to this process as NACTU, we have a programme of uniting affiliates operating in one industrial sector and we hope to achieve this by the end of March. A divided trade union movement can be manipulated to serve the interests of the bourgeoisie.

If we reach a new society with the working class divided, we run the risk of losing the gains we have made. We need also to look beyond COSATU and NACTU to unions that are outside the two federations to draw them into the process of unity.

The outstanding Summit on Trade Union Unity must be convened without delay to discuss this question and set the requisite structures into place to work towards this goal. We have an appointment with history as the working class but we cannot meet it without unity.

Conclusion

As an important component of the trade union and the liberation movement, all eyes are at your Congress. The issues that you will be dealing with are not of

interest only to workers but to the rest of the national and the international trade union movement. We are confident that you will handle your deliberations with the sensitivity and responsibility

that is required. ☆

**AMANDLA
VIVA COSATU
VIVA NACTU
VIVA THE SPIRIT OF
WORKING CLASS UNITY**

Standing ovation

This was the first COSATU congress to be addressed by NACTU. When Cunningham Ngcukana, general secretary of NACTU, rose to speak the chair called for a song. The response of delegates was lukewarm. But by the end of his speech the mood had changed completely. Delegates rose in an enthusiastic standing ovation, and then burst into the old song: *Kudala sisebenzel' amabuno, Basebenze mas' hlangane* ("For a long time we have been working for the boers, Workers let us unite"). They were responding to Ngcukana's powerful support for the idea of unity. COSATU

office-bearers embraced the NACTU leader, and then clasped hands as they sang together. In some ways this was the most dramatic and unexpected moment of the congress.

The resolution on union unity reflects some of this enthusiasm (see below). It states that "COSATU is committed to accommodating a wider range of political differences within the federation, provided our principles are not compromised", and proposes calling another Workers Summit with NACTU. While it would be foolish to underestimate the obstacles to unity between COSATU and NACTU, Ngcukana's speech is likely to give unity efforts a strong boost. ♦

COSATU Congress Resolution

5 Trade Union Unity

5.1 We reaffirm our commitment to the principles of "one country, one federation" and "one industry, one union". We have not made sufficient progress in realising these goals and NACTU unions, as well as a range of unaffiliated unions and staff associations remain outside our ranks.

5.2 We welcome the increased presence of coloured and indian workers within our ranks, and the small but growing numbers of white workers who have joined COSATU affiliates. A democratic socialist future cannot be constructed with an ethnically divided working class. We oppose attempts to form racially based unions – they are a desperate attempt to withstand the tide of history and are doomed to failure.

5.3 We are still largely a blue-collar federation. We need to develop strategies that can accommodate the increasing numbers of white-collar or professional workers such as teachers, nurses, technicians, bank employees, computer operators etc, who want to join COSATU.

5.4 COSATU and its affiliates should:

- conduct research into all independent and unaffiliated unions – including white, indian and coloured unions – with the aim of

realising the objective of one federation in one country;

- promote working class consciousness to enable our members to organise more effectively across the colour line;
- intensify its organising efforts by engaging all workers in joint practical struggles;
- launch sectoral campaigns aimed at benefitting workers of all races.

5.5 Our approach to union unity

5.5.1 COSATU is committed to accommodating a wider range of political differences within COSATU, provided our principles are not compromised.

5.5.2 A union wanting to affiliate to COSATU should come through the existing affiliate in their sector, and be granted observer status in COSATU.

5.5.3 COSATU should play a facilitating role where mergers happen within the Federation, and it should be centrally involved where another federation wants to merge with COSATU.

5.5.4 We need to call another Workers Summit with NACTU and other unaffiliated unions to address the question of union unity.

5.6 Unity between SARHWU and TGWU

We call on SARHWU and TGWU to merge before the end of 1991. This process should be monitored by the CEC. The CEC should also look into the question of workers not in the transport sector. ♦