

# Battle lines drawn at Numsa congress

Leadership battles exposed tensions and divisions at Numsa's national congress held from 23-29 September 2004. The **Labour Bulletin** looks at the fights and examines whether the congress was able to move beyond politics to discuss much-needed organisational issues.

**M**ore than 700 delegates gathered at Gallagher Estate in Midrand, for the seventh national congress of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa). Aside from evaluating the first ten years of democracy, delegates had a range of critical organisational issues to debate such as a review of the unions' collective bargaining strategy. But because of the 'battle lines' drawn around the election of new office bearers, critical debate, which affects the overall organisation, was deferred to next year.

As has become tradition in the main Cosatu affiliates, the congress was addressed by senior leaders from Cosatu (Zwelinzima Vavi, General secretary), the ANC (Kgalema Motlanthe, Secretary General), the SACP (Jeremy Cronin, Deputy General Secretary) and government (Membathisi Mdladlana, Minister of Labour). A central theme of all the speeches was the need to ensure unity in the organisation so as to build Numsa into a

powerful force. Motlanthe said this 'means that this congress needs to pay as much attention to its deliberations and its resolutions, as it does to the manner it handles the election of its leaders. Our experience of democratic organisation over several decades, tells us that it is only natural that leadership elections are to be accompanied by contestation over positions. This is the essence of democracy'. He added: 'What is critically important is how the delegates use leadership contests to strengthen, rather than weaken, the organisation'. Vavi came on strongly about the divisions. He warned that democracy must prevail and unions should not purge those who have different views.

While guest speakers spoke openly about the tensions and divisions, so did union delegates. As one delegate from the Western Transvaal region said: 'We should not pretend that everything is normal.' A delegate from the Eastern Cape made a very significant contribution. He said: 'Mbuyi (Ngwenya, the former and late general secretary) always maintained that there was no better cause than building the working class. It is important to remind this congress especially in a society dominated by brutal capital...Part of what this congress must do is in the interests of workers and that means we need to bury the ghost of Mafikeng (the divisions which emerged at the previous Numsa congress in Mafikeng)...Our unity and strength are underpinned in our diversity and we need to ensure all tendencies exist in the organisation but all tendencies need to be subverted to ensure unity...What binds us together is the interests of the working class. We are not friends or relatives. What binds us is unity. We do not have to like each other or be friends. We have a responsibility beyond this congress - no-one else is going to deliver this'.

The secretariat report highlighted the context in which the congress was taking

place. It examined the first decade of democracy and noted the gains made by the working class. The report also identified a number of setbacks and problems experienced in the past ten years including the adoption of a conservative macro-economic policy by the ANC government.

On the organisational side, developments included the reported advances in stabilising the union's finances, measures that were successful in streamlining structures and operations of the organisation, and positive developments in work to review key activities of the union such as the collective bargaining strategy. In the early 1990's the union decided to adopt a new collective bargaining strategy, which sought to link wages to skills training, changes to the grading system and job security. The introduction of this strategy, viewed at the time as a radical shift in approach to collective bargaining, occurred against a backdrop of major restructuring (and job losses) taking place in the sectors in which the union was organising.

Congress was supposed to discuss a review of this strategy but failed to do so and it will now be discussed in the new year. A report, commissioned by the union, to assess the success of the strategy, found that it was not properly implemented. The report posed a number of questions, which are yet to be debated in the union. Did the strategy fail or succeed? What strides have been made? Does the strategy remain relevant?

Aside from organisational issues and concerns around capacity at a local level (which was raised in the secretariat report), the congress was preceded by an intense leadership battle. The leadership contest divided the union into two parts: one side believed to be more loyal to the ANC and another understood to be more critical of it, and harbouring within it such diverse views as the ultra-left and the former 'workerist' tendencies. At the heart of the differences is the ongoing debate in the country regarding



Left to right: Former Numsa president Daniel Dube, deputy president Jacob Zuma and former Numsa general secretary Mbesi Mbayekiso.



Numsa President Tom Mutuzeli

the character of the transition and the role played by the ANC, both in and outside government.

Therefore, while the differences and confrontations were not new and are normal during congresses, what was new was the use of the media and the courts, to advance interests of the opposing groups. It is in this context that the various guest speakers from the ANC-led alliance made passionate calls for use of constructive methods and respect of organisational integrity. What could be commended about the whole situation was the transparent and open manner in which the leadership handled the situation. Not only was there no attempt to hide or deny anything, but the situation and its origins was openly articulated in the official congress documents.

#### ELECTION OF NEW OFFICE-BEARERS

Congress elected a new team of national office-bearers that will guide the union in the coming four years until the next congress in 2008. They are:

- President: Mtuzuzeli Tom (re-elected)
- First Vice President: Ben Khoza (newly-elected)
- Second Vice President: Cedric Gina (newly-elected)
- General Secretary: Silumko Nondwangu (re-elected)
- Deputy General Secretary: Bheki Magagula (re-elected)
- Treasurer: Philemon Shiburi (newly-elected)

#### CONGRESS RESOLUTIONS

Political resolutions tended to dominate debate. On the political front, the union remains supportive of the relationship with the ANC, but emphasised the need for proper



Numsa general secretary Silumko Nondwangu.

consultations before any policy change is implemented by government. Congress also resolved on the need for intensive political education for workers, to enrich debates and transformation in all spheres of society.

On the socio-economic front, congress called on government to prioritise measures to fight poverty and unemployment, and to set developmental targets in that regard. Government should protect local firms from cheap imports and regulate the price of locally produced raw materials and commodities (presumably in the domestic market as a means to stimulate growth in the downstream industry). The union committed itself to implementing those decisions of the Growth and Development Summit (GDS) that affect Numsa (eg to convene sector job summits in the engineering industries).

To achieve improvements in the union's capacity, congress agreed on the need to lead a strong recruitment drive and enhance efforts to improve service to members. The union will also intensify shop stewards training and education, to enhance shop stewards capacity to engage in transformation and restructuring in the workplace. Furthermore, the union reaffirmed measures to ensure sound management of finances and proper/honest administration of union activities.

On the international front, delegates

agreed on the need for co-operation with progressive social movements in building global solidarity against 'imperialism and global capitalist onslaught'. Delegates called for the cancellation of Africa's debt, which they accuse of frustrating the continent's development. They called on Cosatu to participate in the NEPAD Labour Council, to engage in deliberations towards an economic and development model, which will address the needs of the working people and poor of the continent. The union will also sustain efforts to regulate behaviour of multinational corporations.

#### CONCLUSION

The unions' key challenge now is to take on board the sentiments expressed by various speakers at congress and build unity. The leadership has to provide a unified vision for the union. This will be no easy task as the balance of power is delicately poised. It would be incorrect for the leadership who were elected to assume a view that the elections were a 'victors outcome' as there were a significant portion of union members who did not support them. They should therefore, guard against assuming that if they get the key people opposing them out of the union and that they will have the authority they need. The leadership has to realise that it now has to earn its authority. A senior union official apparently expressed the view that an attempt should have been made to find some compromise in settling the leadership battle instead of going for all out victory. The union, in its current state, cannot afford further division. After the National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (Nehawu) congress in June, the leadership claimed that it would have to go on a major exercise to rebuild the credibility of the union. While the Numsa situation is not comparable, perhaps consideration should be given to a similar exercise.