

COSATU and the elections

The trade union movement is a bastion of democracy. Most workers learnt about democracy in trade unions. In a young democracy such as ours, a powerful force for community and solidarity such as COSATU together with the democratic movement has a particular responsibility to make sure that democracy succeeds' *Report of the September Commission, August 1997*

In the 1980s COSATU debated its relationship to politics. At its 1987 national congress a consensus was arrived at by the major tendencies (workerists and populists) within the federation when they adopted the Freedom Charter and acknowledged that unions had a role in politics. This laid the foundation for the Tripartite Alliance. COSATU then decided to strengthen the ANC and support it in the elections. The main question then was how to do this and also ensure that such support benefited COSATU and its members.

At its 6th congress, COSATU once again pledged its support to the ANC. It feels that the best way to 'defend, consolidate and advance social transformation' is to stand in an alliance with the ANC and to work towards an election victory for the ANC. At its first CEC of 1999 COSATU 'resolutely embraced the ANC's election manifesto, and believes that the manifesto creates the necessary socio-economic and political conditions for increased delivery

Contrary to 1994, COSATU will not be deploying any leaders to Parliament this year. Etienne Vlok investigates.

of a better life for all of our people'.

This article looks at how the federation is trying to ensure an ANC victory in 1999. It also compares COSATU's involvement this year with 1994.

The 1994 elections

Before the 1994 elections, COSATU decided to deploy members and officials to stand for election on an ANC ticket. About 60 COSATU leaders left during the 1994 elections for Parliament or provincial legislatures. Twenty of these people were deployed, meaning the ANC reserved space on its elections' lists for COSATU leaders. COSATU then chose the leaders to take up those spaces.

COSATU Wits regional secretary, Dan Mohapi, explains that in 1994 'the ANC did not have experience in government so COSATU had to assist them by providing skillful leaders. This year COSATU has not released comrades on block. 1994 was an exception because it was the first democratic elections'.

When leaders were deployed, COSATU and its affiliates lost some experienced,

long-serving unionists who had led the federation through difficult times. At the time some unions found it difficult to replace these leaders. Mohapi points out the positive impact - since the loss of leadership in 1994, COSATU and its affiliates have developed a second and even a third layer of leaders to replace those gone and going in the future.

Despite the disadvantage of losing leaders, the federation felt that having candidates on the ANC list offered opportunities:

- people trusted by workers would occupy key policy-making institutions;
- workers could access sympathetic decision-makers who understood workers;
- union nominees came from a tradition which respects the principle of accountability, particularly mandates and report-backs

COSATU also participated in the 1994 elections by doing voter education and electioneering for the ANC. The federation felt that these activities would allow it to re-establish contact with membership and revive their interest in union activities, recruit new members and revitalise its structures. However, this did not result in large membership gains for most unions.

COSATU seconded personnel and resources to the election campaign on a large scale. Every union released at least one full-time official and some shopstewards at national level and in each region. However, it was reported that



COSATU will target farmworkers during their programme.

union activities were negatively affected by the election campaign.

Those deployed in 1994 were to be accountable to the ANC Jay Naidoo, ex-COSATU general secretary and a 1994 candidate, said that 'you cannot have MPs operating on a narrow mandate of just COSATU. There will of course be links .. but there will be no direct mandate' He favoured a system of formal consultation at all levels of society.

Mbhazima Shilowa, COSATU's general secretary in 1994, was not in favour of formal links between the MPs and the federation. While he agreed that there

must be channels of communication, he said that the candidates had been released: 'COSATU does not want to become a labour wing of the ruling party.'

1997 congress resolutions

COSATU's September Commission recommended that the ANC be built with a working-class bias. This could be done either by trade unionists and worker leaders playing their role in the ANC as individuals or by COSATU deploying people to the ANC. The September Commission proposed that both these options be pursued to build working-class leadership in the ANC.

Delegates at the 1997 COSATU congress discussed this recommendation and adopted the following resolutions:

- COSATU should allow the most capable cadres including its national office bearers (NOBs) to stand for positions in alliance structures, Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) formations and other strategic institutions like the public sector and parastatals.
- There should be open debates on deployment in the constitutional structures of the federation. There should be a distinction between people being elected by structures and deployment. In this regard no person shall stand for election in the alliance and in civil society and then claim this to be deployment by COSATU.

Although the 1997 resolutions allow for it, leaders would not be deployed as they were in 1994. They have now been elected onto the lists through their ANC or SACP activism by those organisations' structures. Bhabhali Nhlapo, the national elections' co-ordinator, explains: 'We realised that deployment without activism is not enough. We followed the dictums of socialism. People that go to Parliament must not only be COSATU activists, but

must have shown a broader class consciousness by their involvement in other organisations as well.'

Nhlapo argues that 'the problem with deployment is that you are not sure what area of competency the leaders have. We wanted a chunk of trade unionists in government in 1994. But now the fusion of ANC into COSATU is well oiled so it is not necessary to deploy'.

The congress also adopted the following resolution regarding the Tripartite Alliance: An election platform must be developed at alliance level for the 1999 elections to cover the following areas (amongst others):

- providing financial resources;
- agreeing on the candidates list process;
- agreeing on the key policies for the election manifesto;
- electioneering support for the ANC at workplace and in communities;
- implementing and reviewing structures in regard to policies of governance.

National co-ordination

COSATU's 1999 election programme is being co-ordinated nationally by Mbhazima Shilowa and second vice-president, Peter Malepe. They are the political heads of the programme and represent COSATU on the ANC's NEC elections' sub-committee. Nhlapo heads the managerial part of the programme and represents COSATU on the elections' management committee of the alliance. COSATU also has national co-ordinators who co-ordinate with the regions and with the affiliates. All the COSATU regions and the affiliates have co-ordinators.

Nhlapo says that the capacity for this year's election will be the same as in 1994. The difference is that this year they only have ten full time people involved, all based at head office.

In 1994, all the people involved were



SAAPAWU will mobilise voters in the rural areas.

full-time. Nhlapo attributes the differences in resources seconded to the timing of the 1999 elections. 'It is being held at the same time as our collective bargaining round. In 1994 the elections took place six weeks before our bargaining round. Now we have to prioritise the collective bargaining.'

Mohapi addressed the fears that the servicing of members will be neglected during the elections' programme by pointing out that although some comrades have been seconded full-time, the rest will do their day-to-day work. He adds, 'We do not want to collapse COSATU into an election machine. Otherwise nothing will be left of the federation after the elections. We are aware of the trap of not servicing our members if we only focus on the elections.'

COSATU's 1999 elections' programme budget, according to Nhlapo, consists of R2-million contributed by the ANC and

R1,8-million from affiliates. Each member from each COSATU affiliate contributed R1. This R3,8-million budget is much less than the R8-million budget of 1994.

Nhlapo states that COSATU is not paying anyone involved in the elections' programme this year. Their original employers, be it affiliates or companies, must pay them. Their employers must release them with their own resources such as cellular phones and cars. This election they will not have separate offices and will not be employing new people and buying phones and cars.

Nhlapo notes that the alliance has set up the following election structures on which COSATU is also represented: National Election Teams (NETs), Provincial Election Teams (PETs), Regional Election Teams (RETs) and Branch or Village Election Teams (BETs). He adds that COSATU's role is to co-ordinate and mobilise people to vote for the ANC. The

ANC is the implementing vehicle. Nhlapo continues: 'These elections are not about COSATU. COSATU is part of the alliance and thus the ANC.'

Nhlapo links the elections' campaign to building organisation: 'We are linking the election drive to issues of organisational renewal and collective bargaining. We have to show the linkage between COSATU and the ANC. We see the elections as a vehicle to continue the Autumn offensive recruitment drive started in 1998. For instance, SAAPAWU will go to farms to do some voter education and organise new members as well.'

Regional co-ordination

Mohapi discusses the Wits region's co-ordination of the elections' programme: 'We have appointed our own organiser to be the full-time co-ordinator in this region. There are different clusters under him. Affiliates' shopstewards and organisers have been seconded to do co-ordination work in these clusters.'

COSATU Wits also has an elections' unit that meets every fortnight. It liaises with the ANC and its structures. Mohapi and the treasurer are on the ANC's provincial structures which include political and management structures. COSATU has seconded people to participate in these structures

At the beginning of April all affiliates will second full-time officials for the elections. Affiliates will organise their own programmes and indicate to the ANC and SACP which areas to target. As in 1994 shopstewards will be answerable to their unions. They will report directly to their unions which report to COSATU in the regions. Nhlapo argues that this reporting system ensures the involvement of the affiliates

Nhlapo says that COSATU is not scaling down its community involvement. 'The

need for massive community education is not there anymore. Many people have voted twice or even three times now.' COSATU is involved in places like farms and construction sites, especially long-term ones such as in the Maputo corridor.

Three phases

COSATU's elections' programme has three phases: registration, mobilisation and 'delivering the vote'.

First phase: registration

During the first phase there were meetings in factories, industrial areas and locals to encourage workers to get bar-coded identity documents and to register. In order to ensure that workers could apply for IDs, COSATU got the Department of Home Affairs to set up their mobile units in industrial areas. They also informed workers where to register.

Second phase: mobilisation

COSATU is organising workshops on the ANC's election manifesto to show workers how they will benefit from it. These workshops will be held in industrial areas, factories, community venues and on farms. During this phase, COSATU will use the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) statistics on where people have registered to mobilise the vote for the ANC. Nhlapo says strongly: 'We are going to push for an overwhelming victory - much more than two-thirds. And unlike Mugabe we will not abuse the two-thirds majority.'

Nhlapo maintains that COSATU's strategies for its locals, shopstewards and organisers are the same as in 1994. However, voter education is different this time around. The workshops focus more on election management, electoral law and why people should vote for the ANC.

Mohapi says that they have identified vulnerable sectors in the Wits region that



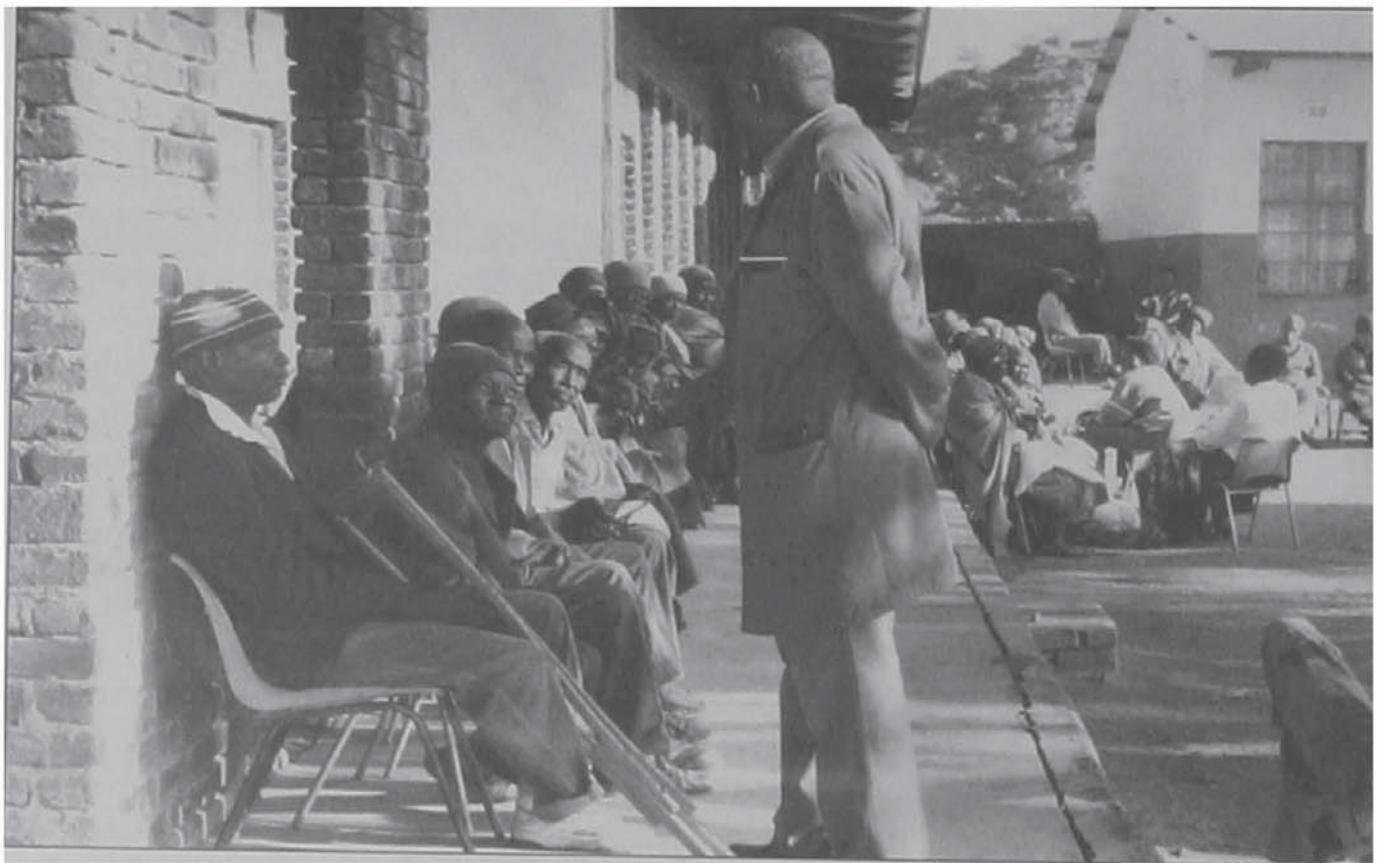
COSATU helped ensure that voters registered.

need attention. farmworkers, domestic workers, education, mining and construction

In the mining sector, a rival union, Workers' Mouthpiece is campaigning for the UDM. Mohapi says that COSATU has to show a presence there. He also states: 'The education sector is seen as vulnerable because a lot of downsizing has taken place. During the campaign for the Job Creation Trust we picked up certain perceptions in that sector. We have to change the mindset. We must focus on the public sector too because of the privatisation that has taken place. The construction sector is vulnerable because of the high levels of illiteracy. We must provide education and information to those workers.' CAWU will be assisted by NUM in organising and mobilising these workers and sorting out the voting districts. Nhlapo adds that COSATU will target domestic workers and attempt to

organise them during the election drive. In the transport sector, TGWU will ensure that drivers get time off to vote. SAAPAWU is also doing good work in a project with farmworkers.

Mohapi says that commercial research is putting ANC support at 54% at the moment. Eleven per cent of the people are undecided. Contrary to Nhlapo, Mohapi says that the alliance is expecting between 57% and 60%. Convincing as many workers as possible to vote for the ANC will be a challenge since some workers have doubts about the ANC. TGWU's co-ordinator for social benefits, Maggie Pooe, explains: 'I travel around the country quite often. When I ask workers whether they have registered they say 'Yes, but we are not going to vote for the ANC'. In 1994 when you spoke to workers about the ANC you knew that they supported the ANC. But now it is a different story. When you shout 'Viva TGWU and Viva COSATU',



During its programme, COSATU will assist the elderly and disabled.

the workers reply with 'Viva'. But when you shout 'Viva ANC', the workers are much quieter.'

Third Phase: delivering the vote

During this phase COSATU will assist people to vote without engaging in mobilisation, in accordance with the IEC and the electoral laws

Asked about workers who might support other political parties and their involvement in the elections' programme, Nhlapo and Mohapi point to the resolution at COSATU's 1997 congress which states that the federation will vote for the ANC and do electioneering for it. Mohapi acknowledged that some members might support other parties, but pointed out that they would probably not avail themselves to do election work for the ANC. Nhlapo adds that if members vote for another party they may not use COSATU activities or resources for it.

The list

This year only 11 COSATU leaders will be on the ANC's list compared to 20 in 1994. These include four NOBs on the national list: John Gomomo (president), Mbhazima Shilowa (general secretary), Connie September (first vice-president) and Ronald Mofokeng (national treasurer). There are six regional office bearers (ROBs) on provincial lists: Dan Mohapi (Wits regional secretary), Paulos Ngcobo (KwaZulu-Natal regional secretary), Assistance Moshudulu (Western Transvaal vice-regional chairperson), Wianle Malopo (Western Transvaal treasurer), Randy Pieterse (Western Cape chairperson) and Alfred Misi (Eastern Cape regional chairperson). There is also one person from COSATU head office on the provincial list: Mosheledi Papane (national education secretary).

Mohapi is pleased to be on the ANC's regional list for Gauteng. He is a member of the ANC's Meadowlands branch and

also a member of the SACP's provincial executive committee. 'I have been elected because I am active in those organisations. My understanding of the trade union movement is that it is a school for workers. At some stage one has to graduate and go and use your education in government. I will help COSATU propagate its resolutions in government. We will maintain a link with the workers although we must still discuss how'

Maintaining links

Nhlapo explains that the relationship between the new MPs, members of provincial legislatures and COSATU will happen through the structures of the alliance. There will not be separate caucuses. There is not a person-to-organisation link but an organisation to-organisation link.

Mohapi argues that the new MPs and MPLs will not be accountable to COSATU as they have not been elected or deployed by COSATU. He says that he will be accountable to the ANC as they elected him. But are COSATU members aware that he will not be accountable to them? 'The members on the factory floor might not understand that we are not accountable. They might think that I have been deployed and not elected. But the workers will still expect us to advance worker struggles on their behalf.'

Mohapi adds that one way to ensure that their 'involvement in government is not removed from workers is to use the SACP to establish a base with COSATU. This way the organisations will move closer. We must make sure that the SACP leadership understands the workers and their issues'.

The politics of an alliance

COSATU's huge involvement in the 1994 elections led to questions being asked

about neglected members. This year less officials and shopstewards are being seconded to the elections so COSATU is sure that it will not neglect members. It is also clear that COSATU is aware of the dangers of being absorbed in politics and forgetting about its members. However, gaps will exist when leaders are seconded to help with elections and there may be a decline in servicing of membership. This may pose a danger to COSATU, especially because it provides an opportunity for rival unions to recruit.

The newly-elected ex-COSATU parliamentarians will not be held individually accountable to COSATU. It is important that membership understands that COSATU can only try and influence all ANC parliamentarians. Membership cannot be disappointed if Shilowa or September do not do what COSATU wants them to do.

During their elections' programme COSATU is focusing on the education and public sectors, where some ill feelings exist towards the ANC due to downscaling and privatisation. COSATU will be electioneering in these sectors to repair the damage done and restore the ANC's name and honour. However, after the elections COSATU will continue to fight the government on privatisation and downscaling. Until then, they will be telling retrenched teachers and public sector workers that the ANC is the party for them. ★

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