

COSATU fires fresh shots

COSATU held its annual Policy Conference from 15 to 17 May. Whilst the most publicised decision was to embark on strike action against aspects of the Basic Conditions of Employment Bill, a number of other resolutions reflect labour's increasing anger and uncertainty about the direction of government's macro-economic and social policy.

COSATU and its affiliates have been extremely vocal in their criticism of GEAR. Labour has not, however, developed a coherent response. The hurriedly produced *Social Equity* document which was unveiled early last year failed to provide detailed policy alternatives.

The 250 delegates to the conference focussed on:

- the apartheid wage gap
- workplace restructuring
- collective bargaining strategies
- regulating minimum wages
- the social wage (social security, health, housing, transport, retirement funds and municipal infrastructure)
- employment creation.

There was little disagreement on the central focus of discussion: how to ensure that basic social democratic rights are advanced and maintained.

While socialism is still on the agenda, it is clear that it remains a slogan, rather than a set of alternative policies. It would seem that the best option on offer at the moment is Keynesian social democracy and that even

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this is too radical for labour's allies in government.

Declaration

In the end, COSATU adopted a wide-ranging declaration that stands in stark contrast to existing government policy - except, perhaps, in the area of health, where the federation resolved to support Health Minister, Nkosazana Zuma, in her efforts to build a national health system and to fight the monopolistic drug companies who keep prices high.

Wage gap

While some progress has been made in narrowing the wage gap in the public sector to an eventual target of 12:1, the real 'grave train' is in the private sector, where the gap is as high as 100:1. Delegates resolved to launch a campaign to reduce the gap to 8:1 over the next decade. The first step is to oblige companies to reveal salary information. COSATU proposes to use the Employment Equity Act to achieve this.

Minimum wage

Given the substantial differences between sectors, it is impossible to set a figure that is not so high that it becomes impossible to implement, but not so low as to make it meaningless. Delegates resolved to

campaign for minimum wages for farm and domestic workers.

Privatisation

The conference expressed its disquiet at attempts to privatise water and electricity and called on affiliates in the public sector to develop alternative proposals.

The privatisation of the transport sector provoked much debate. While consensus was easily reached on the need to reject government moves to privatise large sections of the transport industry and to campaign for a state-owned public transport system, delegates were divided over the need to maintain private taxis. The taxi industry has been marred by horrendous violence, as mafia type owners compete for routes.

Some delegates called for taxis to be brought under public ownership. The TGWU, which is involved in talks with government and taxi associations, is clearly nervous about such a proposition. The union urged the conference rather to support government's efforts to regulate the industry. It was decided that the TGWU will circulate a discussion paper for further debate.

Housing

The conference also expressed concern about the lack of housing delivery to the poor. It rejected market-based subsidies for private ownership and called for rented accommodation which poor people can afford. It urged government to force investors to dedicate 5% of their assets to housing, to lower interest rates and to support a campaign for housing brigades.

Investment

Unions have become increasingly involved in investment initiatives over the last few years. The conference warned against union involvement in speculative ventures and called for investment which provides jobs and social services. It was also decided that

affiliates should seek greater representation on the boards of control of retirement funds.

Loyal opposition

Organised labour and its allies know that they are treading a fine line between loyal opposition to the ANC-in-government and action that could threaten the very existence of the Tripartite Alliance. There is, however, very little danger of the alliance breaking in the near future. The ANC realises that when it goes to the polls it cannot do without organised labour. Labour is still hopeful of exerting influence over the ANC.

That is why the ANC conference this December is so important for labour. COSATU is confident that ANC members and many MPs support its rejection of GEAR and the need to revive the RDP as a cornerstone of government policy. The important thing is to adopt measures that will bind government ministers to party decisions and to elect leaders who will ensure that this happens.

COSATU is also well aware that part of the reason why it is losing the ideological battle is the inability of the Left to come up with detailed policy alternatives, particularly at the level of macro-economic policy. In this sense, the policy conference was a missed opportunity. There was no time for affiliates to debate policy proposals prior to the conference. While labour's commitment to a social-democratic development path has been reaffirmed, much remains to be done to counter the sophisticated proposals emanating from consultants in government departments and the business sector.

Nevertheless, the first shots against neo-liberal currents within government have been fired. We can expect more as the year progresses. ★

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