

COSATU reassesses international policy

Affiliation to the ICFTU was a major issue on the agenda of COSATU's recent international policy conference. LANGA ZITA* attended the conference.



the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and Southern African migration.

Affiliation to ICFTU

This was the last item for discussion for the conference. At the 1994 COSATU Congress the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) had sponsored a resolution supporting affiliation. It was clear at the Congress that this position

would not receive the support of all affiliates. The issue was referred to last month's conference for a decision.

Two considerations underpinned the debate at the conference. The first was the understanding within COSATU of global dynamics. An important aspect of this was how the federation, as a radical organisation, should relate to non-radical mass organisations. The second question was, on which basis should COSATU engage with the international union movement? Should this engagement be based on ideological imperatives? If the imperative is to engage with those who represent socialist, anti-imperialist and progressive tendencies, what does each of these frameworks mean in the present situation and which of the present trade union centres represents or potentially represents these tendencies?

In characteristic COSATU mode, an attempt was made to sponsor a compromise

COSATU has left a number of questions unanswered but begun what could be considered a major advance in its international perspective and policy. The breadth and scope of issues covered at the federation's international policy conference at the end of April was impressive.

The two major issues on which the federation had to formulate policy are both topical and important in the light of the new global situation but also within the geopolitics of Southern Africa. These were on affiliation to

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resolution which could receive broad support and which would not lead to an "either/or" situation. The crux of the compromise was an attempt to locate affiliation to the ICFTU within the context of the pursuit of one international trade union centre.

This approach opened up the possibility of agreement without resorting to the acrimonious debate which has dogged the SA trade union movement for so long. However, the "paper coalition" broke down when the teachers' union (SADTU) pointed out that there was a logical inconsistency between the pursuit of one trade union centre and affiliation to the ICFTU.

With this intervention the debate was back to square one. Unions sponsoring different positions attempted to reopen the entire debate and to return to considering the merits of affiliation to either the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) or the ICFTU and to go for a vote if necessary.

The resolution adopted in the end states that COSATU will consider the option of affiliation to an international trade centre, subject to the following process:

- ❑ COSATU will engage the ICFTU and its affiliates to develop an agreement that affiliation of unions should not be based on ideological criteria;
- ❑ COSATU will engage the WFTU and its affiliates, as well as independent trade union federations, on the need for a single international trade union centre.

The final decision to affiliate or not will be taken by the COSATU Central Executive Committee (CEC), based on a two-thirds majority vote. This decision will have to be ratified by the next COSATU Congress.

The question remains, whether, in the present situation the failure to reach an understanding on the ICFTU (which, without doubt, despite all its problems and its association with American foreign policy and intelligence is *de facto* the only living international centre) is the best response by one of the world's most dynamic trade union federations. Is it indeed proper that in the present situation of globalisation and the World

Trade Organisation, which is the instrument of global capital, that COSATU is not part of a workers' centre that could challenge the imperatives of global capital? To what extent should the unions embark on compromises when it comes to controversial issues?

Migrant labour

COSATU has led the way in condemning attacks on immigrant workers and called for humane policies to deal with the issue. The conference called for:

- ❑ a co-ordinated regional and international strategy to deal with the problem of immigration;
- ❑ the scrapping of the Aliens Control Act and its replacement by a more humane law consistent with ILO, UN and OAU conventions;
- ❑ the imposition of heavy penalties on employers who exploit illegal immigrants;
- ❑ legal guarantees of equal wages and working conditions for migrant labour;
- ❑ a Southern African summit involving governments and trade unions to discuss migration in the region;
- ❑ a regional Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP);
- ❑ a negotiated quota on numbers of workers allowed into countries in the region, taking into account the economic imbalances in the region.

A question which could be posed is: is it correct to impose quotas on the movement of workers when capital moves freely across borders? Perhaps a better approach would be one in which talks on the need to negotiate movement within the region are held, without specifying quotas — or, alternatively, quotas emerge as a product of these negotiations.

Southern Africa

The conference resolved that trade unions in the region should co-ordinate joint collective bargaining strategies and encourage worker to worker solidarity. Such co-ordinated strategies should lead to joint campaigns in the region which should be underpinned by a subregional tripartite structure involving business, labour and the state.



Delegates to COSATU's international policy conference

It was resolved that unions "should seek involvement in the decisions of companies to invest or not to invest in the region".

COSATU committed itself to joining "like minded trade unions" and other international organisations for the writing of and rescheduling of repayment of the debt of third world countries. In this way the federation avoided the more thorny issue of the call that has emerging from across the international third world community for the total cancellation of the debt.

In relation to South-South solidarity the conference resolved to focus mainly on third world dictatorships, as well as adopting resolutions from the Third Indian Regional and Trade Union conference. The Indian Ocean resolutions covered, amongst others, a call for presidents in the region to come out openly in support of democratic development (in which trade union and human rights are guaranteed).

North and South

This was the downside of a rather robust conference. Noting the historical support given us by the international trade union movement, COSATU resolved to "identify

further areas in which the experience of these countries can contribute to our organisational capacity". Whilst there is nothing wrong with drawing organisational lessons from other countries, the resolution did not outline the political content of the relationship. This is more the case today to the extent that objectively for the first time globalisation is beginning to bite every one, including the hitherto protected North working class. This suggests the possibility of new forms of relationship between the North and the South beyond "material support" to actual joint struggles.

Social clauses in trade agreements

COSATU joined the international trade union movement and progressive forces in calling for a "social clause" to be inserted in all international trade agreements, and to use trade policy as a weapon to advance worker's rights. In general the social clause was defined as unfettered rights for workers to organise as well as the abolishment of prison labour and child labour. However, the issue of child labour is viewed with suspicion by some third world trade unions (in particular India) who believe that it does not take

cognisance of the economic structure of their economies in which there is an articulation of various modes of production and in which child labour is used as part of family labour.

Also of interest was the resolution to "take industrial action and consumer action against goods coming to South Africa from countries which do not respect trade unions". What does this mean in relation to products such as Hyundai motor

cars produced in an undemocratic environment as South Korea? Will COSATU call for a boycott of these cars?

The conference also resolved to campaign for the restructuring of the World Trade Organisation to ensure that trade union representatives are included in the governing structures.

COSATU joined the third world in calling for the "review of the terms of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) to ensure that the terms of trade between developed and developing countries reflect a more equitable balance". The question is how far can COSATU as a trade union federation go, in pursuing these objectives, and whether the objectives will not necessitate the support of the ANC. If the latter is the case will the federation be able to bring the liberation movement along with it?

Code of conduct for investment

The conference reaffirmed the code of conduct for investment as outlined in the 1992 COSATU economic policy conference with some few substantive additions. It called for the amendment of the Companies Act and any other Acts prohibiting information flow (information that would help the profile of companies wanting to invest in the country).



New affiliate, SASBO, attended the conference

Furthermore investment should be geared towards "the enhancement of productive investment" rather than only speculative. There should be commitment to (domestic) technological transfers. The government's procurement policy must be in line with the above. These resolutions show increasing sophistication on the part of labour and establish COSATU as a pioneer in defining a more creative relationship with the global economic system.

Through the conference COSATU clearly identified itself with the concerns of global popular and working class forces. The federation showed itself, on the whole, well informed on these key debates and willing to input not only fresh ideas on these issues but to act on them. What remains a challenge is whether international concerns will only be matters of occasional conferences, *ad hoc* issues that the labour movement deals with when threatened by the lifting of tariffs etc, or whether the labour movement will implement its emerging strategic approach and in the process bring the democratic movement with it, in particular the ANC? A similar concern would be the response of COSATU if the ANC disagrees (as seems to be the case with privatisation). Will the workers go to the streets? Time will tell. ✪

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