

COSATU congress



challenging elite anxieties

COSATU's Fifth National Congress was marked by serious and focused debate. Delegates resolved that economic policy should be shaped by social and democratic goals. KARL VON HOLDT was there.

South African citizens continue to live in separate worlds, even after our first democratic elections. In early September some 1 800 delegates from the country's biggest and most powerful trade unions participated in COSATU's Fifth

National Congress. Debate was lively and serious, and focused on strategically important issues. A powerful vision of democracy and social development underlay much of what was discussed.

Yet according to the press the main issues at the congress were that "knives were out" for the federation's general secretary, that government ministers who addressed the congress laid down the line on the need for workers to tighten their belts, that workers were cowed and even sullen, and bowed to the need for tariff reform, that the federation is beset by organisational and leadership problems.

Truly, these read like reports from another world, reports penned by ignorant and anxious aliens unable to break with the prejudices of their own world. This clash between worlds is symptomatic of a deeper struggle in our society – a struggle over the

distribution of resources and power, a struggle over development. It is a struggle in which the beneficiaries of apartheid are attempting to shape public debate and policy in such a way that those who were dispossessed of citizenship and resources by apartheid, must now pay the price for reconciliation and reconstruction.

It is a struggle in which COSATU is the most powerful protagonist for a different view – that the poor and the dispossessed come first, and that the rich and powerful must give up some of their wealth and power. Delegates at the COSATU congress staked out this position in resolutions on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), tariffs, economic policy and the social plan.

“The RDP is about transforming ourselves”

One of the most interesting debates – and one with far-reaching implications – centred on the proposal by NUM that COSATU should “campaign for a voluntary contribution by workers, with matching funds by employers” to finance RDP projects, and that “all production output on selected public holidays”, including workers’ earnings and employers’ profits, should be contributed to the RDP fund.

NUM motivated this on the grounds that “the RDP is about transformation, about transforming ourselves from beginning, from seeing ourselves as victims. As working people we should be at the forefront of the RDP.”

SARWHU added, “We used to have stayaways without pay – we as workers should take the lead in sacrificing. We said the RDP must be mass-driven – what did we mean, that we should go to the IMF and the World Bank and ask for money?”

A number of different objections and doubts were raised:

- ❑ that the idea had not been discussed with members and it would be impossible to sell to them (CWIU, NUMSA, SACCAWU);
- ❑ that it could strengthen the idea that

workers should pay for the RDP, and allow employers to pressurise and confuse workers (PPWAWU, POTWA);

- ❑ that public sector workers do not produce goods and would not be able to contribute in the same way (SADTU, SAMWU);

- ❑ and that there should be clarity on how such funds would be controlled and used.

SACTWU then motivated for a series of amendments to meet these objections, noting that “at the end of the day we face a choice as labour – either we pursue our own interests only, or we demonstrate that organised workers are the most selfless in pursuing the interests of the poor, and so lead social transformation again.”

The delegates finally reached agreement to contribute to the RDP through devoting output, profit, earnings, or other means including financial or labour contributions. Wealthy South Africans should contribute a special levy on incomes and profits. A national campaign would be developed around this.

If implemented this resolution would counter the notion that unions are selfish. It could also provide a powerful alternative vision to the idea that workers’ contribution to the RDP should be to tighten belts and stop striking. It is a radical innovation for the trade unions, in that it points beyond a history of militant struggles over wages, towards a struggle over the social use of production.

Social goals come first

Other resolutions extended this approach. The declaration on international trade and tariffs stresses that “there are people and communities first and foremost”.

COSATU’s goals are to strengthen economic rights to work, a living wage and education; to create a strong industrial base and a comprehensive social infrastructure. Tariff reform, says the declaration, can be an *instrument* of economic restructuring to attain these goals – but COSATU rejects the “blind ideological commitment” to free trade,

open markets and low tariffs as a means of solving all problems of society.

COSATU will resist vigorously, continues the declaration, any tariff reform which is not preceded by negotiation with unions, and does not incorporate social adjustment programmes. The document also declares the "fundamental need" for a social clause protecting basic worker rights in all international trade agreements.

In other words, tariff and trade policy must be subordinated to *social* goals, and must be arrived at *democratically* through consultation and negotiation. Other resolutions place broader economic policy in the same social and democratic context. Tax and fiscal policy should promote the redistribution of wealth from rich to poor and end gender discrimination. A Social Plan Act should be drafted to protect workers from the effects of retrenchment through retraining for new jobs, and to create jobs. The public sector should play a fundamental role in economic development.

The financial sector should be transformed so that domestic capital develops the SA economy. Legislation should be drafted to ensure organised workers have a voice in economic decision-making at shopfloor, sectoral and national level. Industrial councils should be mandatory in all industrial sectors. These rights should be backed up by improved rights to strike and picket, and a ban on employing scab labour. State funding should be secured for building union research and education capacity.

While these resolutions set out a broad vision of a co-determined and socially regulated economy, the debate was also marked by serious silences. There was no discussion about the institutions for establishing co-determination at the workplace, or for securing union involvement in broader economic policy. A provocative clause on rejecting "flexible approaches to centralised bargaining" was adopted without debate.

The Cape Town Trade Union Library congratulates the SA Labour Bulletin on its 20th anniversary. Best wishes for the next 20 years.

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The Cape Town Trade Union Library is a resource centre and reading room for trade unionists and workers. It opened in 1983 to serve all non-racial unions in Cape Town and surrounding areas. The library's aim is to counter the imbalances between employers and workers, by providing workers with access to learning and information.



The library offers a reference and lending collection, a shopstewards' training programme and occasional discussion programmes on labour issues. The library's bookshop sells books and journals (including the SALB) of interest to workers. Our slogan is "Knowledge is too important to be left in the hands of the bosses".

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We have had a long and happy relationship with the South African Labour Bulletin and join them in celebrating 20 years of great achievement.

We wish them all the best for continuing their role in the new South Africa!



SACTWU organiser Theo Steel: engaged in focussed, serious debate

Should workplace co-determination take place through workplace councils? Should there be workers on company boards of directors? Should industrial policy be negotiated in industrial councils or in other forums? What should be the relation of such forums to the National Labour and Economic Development Council? What relation does the federation envisage between centralised collective bargaining and plant-level bargaining? What are the rights of unions at all these levels? Would the union movement itself need a fundamental restructuring to match these new institutions?

The lack of debate on these issues is evidence that while COSATU has defined broad goals, it has not yet developed a clear model of the institutions of economic governance that it favours; nor has it developed a comprehensive wage policy or collective bargaining policy. This is not surprising, since currently each affiliate is focused on collective bargaining, in its own sector, with its own institutions, problems and demands.

Towards a stronger centre

A proposal by SACTWU, however, indicates that things may change.

The union proposed that "affiliates should co-ordinate, through COSATU, their collective bargaining programmes, so that over a period of time wage policy is determined at federation level, and the basic wage agreement is reached at macro level, covering all workers in SA, through direct negotiation between COSATU and business South Africa."

In the debate on this clause some unions were cautious, some thought it was pie-in-the-sky, and others were enthusiastic. There was some discussion of COSATU setting up a collective bargaining department to co-ordinate union negotiations on collective bargaining, health and safety, pension funds and legal issues. It was eventually agreed that these ideas were so far-reaching in their implications that they should be referred to the Central Executive Committee, and the office-bearers mandated to draw up comprehensive guidelines for debate.

Organisationally this is perhaps the most far-reaching proposal debated in COSATU since the founding resolution to merge affiliates into broad-based industrial unions. The outcome would inevitably be a shifting of power and resources away from the affiliates and towards the centre. Although many affiliates might balk at this, a stronger centre – as in the labour movements of Italy, Scandinavia, Germany, etc – is probably essential if COSATU wishes to develop a new kind of class consciousness and to play the kind of broad social and economic role other resolutions describe. A global policy on wages, wage levelling, taxation, the social wage, benefits and investment can only be negotiated through a powerful centre.

Can COSATU restructure itself to play this kind of role? Can it develop concrete policies on these issues and institutions, and mobilise for them to be established in South Africa? This could be one of the most interesting debates in the next few years. Already there is a tension between this possibility, and the argument put forward by NUM – and agreed by Congress – that in striving towards self-sufficiency, COSATU should cut back its staff and devolve some functions onto affiliates.

COSATU and the government

With virtually no exceptions the main stream press misinterpreted the significance of the speeches by government ministers, and the response of congress delegates. None of the ministers urged restraint on workers. Only President Mandela did that – and was listened to with good natured amusement. For their part the unions were not “cowed” or “sullen” – they simply decided that a public challenge in a mass forum in front of the press was not the best way to put forward their views.

The ministers did describe very clearly some of the constraints under which they operate and the limitations of national resources. This is the kind of honesty one would expect from ministers who intend to involve trade unions in consultation over the

allocation of resources. Minister of Trade and Industry, Trevor Manuel, for example pointed out that the controversial textile and clothing industry plan would require an investment of R4,5 billion. Was that the best way to use scarce funds, or should it go into building houses, or boosting other industries? A sensible question that the trade union movement needs to debate.

But the minister who really did say something substantial was labour minister Tito Mboweni. And what the labour minister did say was unambiguously supportive of trade unions. New legislation should establish trade union rights to workplace meetings, time off for shopsteward training, and access to information. Basic conditions of employment should increase annual leave from 14 to 21 days, entrench the right to maternity leave, extend leave rights to part-time and temporary workers, and start a phased process towards a 40 hour week and an eight hour day. Mboweni also pointed out that COSATU should not simply rely on him to achieve these goals, but needed to engage in a political struggle to build support for its positions publicly and in parliament.

Clearly the relation of COSATU to the new government is a complex and nuanced one. It has different relationships with different ministers and officials, and it can expect a different kind of interaction with different ministries, departments and issues. COSATU resolved to build its capacity to influence and lobby the ANC, to support the ANC component of the Government of National Unity, and to resist government decisions that challenge its interests.

For the majority of affiliates the Tripartite Alliance is the best vehicle for this complex process of shaping and engaging in struggle over government policy. NUMSA alone put forward a resolution to end the alliance: “future relations will be conducted with the ANC as part of the government of the day through such forums as the NEF, NMC etc”. It also called for unifying working class organisations and parties around a socialist



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Tito Mboweni and Sam Shilowa: a complex, dynamic relationship between the ANC and COSATU

programme – which “could take the form of a working class party”. This resolution fell away for lack of a seconder.

So, despite the expectations and assessments of many journalists, there is to be no dramatic parting of the ways. The relation between ANC and COSATU will continue to be a dynamic one based fundamentally on the RDP – with conflict and agreement at different times and on different issues.

COSATU vital for our future

The Fifth National Congress showed a COSATU which continues to be a healthy organisation with the ability to engage in strategic analysis. Debate was serious and focused. Less time was wasted on political posturing than in the past. The emphasis was on concrete problems and issues. More resolutions than in the past were fully debated and agreed without being shunted off to other structures or railroaded into inadequate compromises. The challenge of course lies in the implementation. It is here

that the organisational and capacity problems in the federation could frustrate its goals.

None of the debates or resolutions was adequately analysed in the press. Yet the world represented by COSATU is vitally important for our country. COSATU is the most powerful and strategically sophisticated force from the world of poverty and hunger, the world of those excluded from education and a decent community life. It is an organisation shaped by the experience of apartheid oppression and grinding exploitation – an organisation whose members have developed a vision of transformation, democracy, and social justice. It is the best hope we have for ensuring that the ANC’s vision does not shrink to a concern for “investor confidence”. South Africans from the world of free market prejudices and elite anxieties should learn to understand COSATU’s world – for it is a world that promises to continue challenging their own. ☆

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