

“Compromise needs no organisation at all”

Impressions of Cosatu’s 10th congress

Cosatu’s 10th national congress invited sympathetic organisations to attend with speaking rights. **Martin Jansen** gives his impressions of the congress and expresses his disappointment that its slogan to defend decent work and socialism was not in any way realised or planned for.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) held its congress from 21 to 24 September nearly two years after the historic ANC Polokwane conference where the neo-liberals under the leadership of Thabo Mbeki were defeated by the left within the Tripartite Alliance. Cosatu along with the South African Communist Party (SACP) played a central role in the victory after mobilising since 2005 in defence of Jacob Zuma against corruption charges and his ousting as deputy president of the country.

The congress also came at a time when the country’s economy had been battered for a year by the global economic crisis and an estimated 500 000 jobs had been lost.

With these two factors at the back of my mind and greeted by the congress slogan as I entered the hall at Gallagher Estate, ‘Consolidating working class power in defence of decent work and socialism’, I took my seat with some political optimism that historic decisions would take working-class struggle forward.

Cosatu congress always makes a big impression on the uninitiated by its sheer size, along with the mass uniformity of clothes and colour, the décor and delegates’ singing. The 10th congress was no different but significantly had an even stronger ANC flavour than before, with huge banners displaying the presidents of the ANC since 1912. This was accompanied by a special ANC exhibition at the main entrance to the hall which as one delegate put it, illustrated the “ANCification” of Cosatu.

During the congress I was also intrigued by the new phenomenon of competitions, where delegates won microwaves and TVs with draws announced from the platform taking up valuable congress time.

The congress programme, reports and resolutions were contained in professionally prepared publications and neatly packaged in smart wheel travel cases along with congress t-shirts and caps. But beyond the gloss, I experienced much disappointment with the congress which hardly reflected the harsh

realities of working-class life in South Africa. Delegates emerged empty handed without any campaign or programme of action other than printed paper and memories of speeches.

SA MOST UNEQUAL SOCIETY

After the congress it was officially announced that South Africa is the most unequal society in the world, with more than half our people living in poverty and a million jobs lost within the first nine months of this year. A searing indictment of Cosatu and the Tripartite Alliance.

The congress paid little attention to these realities and its declaration only saw fit to state, “In the short term we support the Framework Response to the Global Economic Crisis. The main objective of the programme should be to save and create jobs; stimulate production and economic growth, as well as to cushion the unemployed and the poor from the effects of the global economic crisis.”

Yet the congress had planned nothing to defend and save jobs. It had not decided on anything that calls its affiliates and 1.7 million members to organise, unite and struggle to defend jobs. It is the same framework agreement coupled with political complacency, a business-as-usual approach by unions to retrenchments with their main defence being the Labour Relations Act’s section 189, that has allowed capital to embark on its jobs’ bloodbath.

The job-losses during this economic crisis have been nearly 10 times the rate of job-losses

during Thabo Mbeki's reign, and has surpassed the harm caused during the period of the "1996 class project".

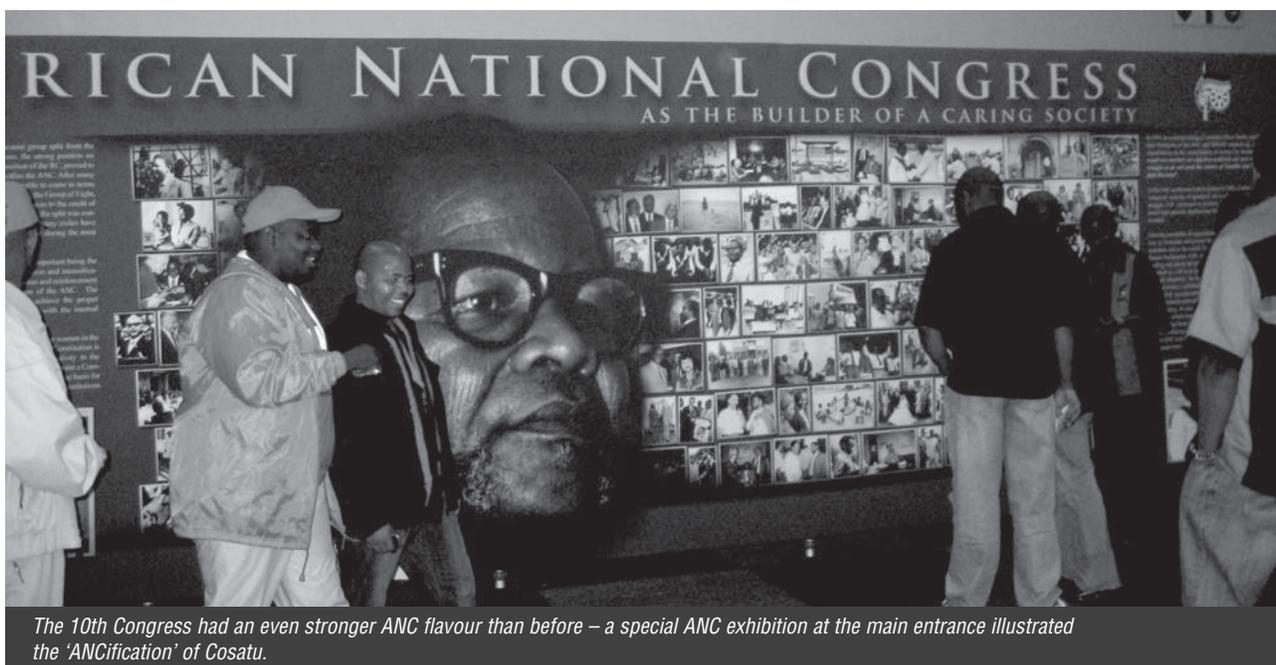
This reality and Cosatu's failure to come up with a mass campaign to defend jobs and fight poverty rendered the congress' slogan hollow, cynical rhetoric as genuine socialism can only come about

take the mass democratic struggle for socialism forward.

Cosatu seems to be directing its political 'struggle' efforts around economic policy towards the Tripartite Alliance and the ANC government to which it has committed excessive political loyalty. This was exemplified by the much reported tussle at the

Ironically Cosatu's 8th national congress held in 2003 adopted a programme titled 'Consolidating Working Class Power for Quality Jobs - Toward 2015'. This programme highlighted that Cosatu needed to:

1. build the power of the organised working class locally and internationally,



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through the active mass struggles of the working class from below.

The effects of the economic crisis offered an important opportunity to take the struggle for socialism forward ideologically, politically and organisationally. The congress endorsed a sham capitalist 'solution' to the job losses which contradicted its pro-socialist slogan. The failure to fight, campaign and struggle to save jobs has rendered Cosatu complicit in the socio-economic disaster. An historic opportunity has been lost to revitalise the labour movement, link up with other impoverished sections of the working class and

congress around who should head economic policy development and implementation, the Cosatu deployee, Ebrahim Patel or Trevor Manuel.

Cosatu's mute response around fundamental aspects of the economic policy debate on whether it is pro-capitalist or working class, as well as being locked into tinkering with aspects of the capitalist economy such as inflation targeting and interest rates, and the absence of a campaign around job losses, gave the impression that the federation did not want to rock the boat of the Zuma-led ANC government.

2. strengthen the tripartite alliance and,
3. intervene in socio-economic policy in the short term to stem the job-loss bloodbath and fight for quality jobs.

The 2015 programme also committed the federation to recruiting four million members by the 10th national congress in 2009.

Whilst the secretariat reports offered a review of the federation and its affiliates, its failure to achieve its commitments made six years ago were not admitted or analysed.

Similarly, previous congress resolutions are hardly ever reviewed. It's as if congresses are about

showcasing Cosatu and its leadership's posturing and oratory.

Cosatu also needs to review its preparation processes for congresses. These are affiliate oriented with dozens of resolutions submitted for the congress to consider. It was impossible for delegates to read and seriously engage with all resolutions, let alone for the congress to debate and adopt resolutions. So most were forwarded to Cosatu's Central Executive Committee (CEC).

SOME IMPORTANT DEBATES

There were some important resolutions that generated good discussion and at times heated debate. These included:

- Young workers - a commitment to focus on organising young workers, including establishing youth desks and allocating special organising staff.
- Climate change - a historically neglected area of trade union and working-class organisation and it will be a milestone if Cosatu does serious follow-up beyond making media statements.
- Xenophobia - a commitment to combating xenophobia highlighted by the violent attacks during 2008. However, the resolution was not linked to organising the huge influx of African migrant workers into trade unions. A last minute contribution by myself permitted an amendment to the resolution encouraging Cosatu affiliates to organise African migrant workers.
- A resolution of the International Trade Union Congress (Ituc) highlighted the limitations and political weaknesses of the body and committed Cosatu to "transforming the international

trade union movement into truly workers' organisations fighting for the interests of workers".

- Sex workers - a long overdue resolution submitted by the police and prisons union, Popcru, called for the regulation of sex work and generated heated debate and was deferred with several other resolutions to the CEC.

CONCLUSION

Together with the "Polokwane victory", and by not developing a radical programme of mass action to defend jobs, it seems as if Cosatu has decisively shifted away from its struggle orientation towards influencing the alliance and the ANC government and towards introducing Keynesian measures to the economy.

Cosatu hopes through this approach to create jobs that will reverse desperate poverty and inequality. Yet it is this political approach that is self-defeating because it undermines its only source of power, a politically active mass of organised class conscious workers. It is this approach that encourages capital to proceed undeterred with terminating hundreds of thousands of jobs and condemning millions to poverty and misery with some of the most horrific social ills in the world.

During the 1980s, Cosatu was at the forefront of the Mass Democratic Movement, along with the United Democratic Front, in the struggle for freedom from oppression and exploitation against the apartheid government and the capitalist class. At the time, its radicalism, militancy and strength of organisation elevated it to the most revered and respected union organisation in the world.

Millions of workers in South Africa and the world looked towards Cosatu as an example of struggle against capitalism and advancing the struggle for socialism.

Today, Cosatu is a shadow of its former self, largely inactive in mass struggles. Its main focus has shifted from struggles on the ground, workplaces and communities, to the boardrooms of co-determinist forums such as Nedlac (National Economic Development Labour Council) and Tripartite Alliance structures.

The strikes around annual collective bargaining and the vaguely formulated, ineffective and sporadic jobs and poverty campaign during the previous three-year period, do not reflect radicalism on the part of Cosatu. Rather they are routine bureaucratically managed activities which make no attempt to threaten capitalist class power and strengthen the working class.

As long as this continues and Cosatu fails to reach out to other sections of the working class in communities, and develop a radical programme of mass action against poverty, job losses and unemployment and for socialism from below, South Africa is doomed to worsening poverty and misery for the majority with the main beneficiaries being white monopoly capital and their corrupt junior partners - the new black capitalist elite represented by the ANC.

As Karl Marx remarked, "In order for workers to submit and compromise it needs no organization at all".

Martin Jansen attended the Cosatu congress as director of Workers' World Media Productions. This article however is written in his personal capacity.