

Connie goes to parliament

*On the eve of the 1999 elections the Labour Bulletin interviewed Cosatu's former first vice-president **Connie September**. Five years on the Bulletin caught up with her to discuss her experiences in parliament as a former Cosatu leader.*

Bulletin: Looking back on the last five years, have your expectations of being in parliament been realised?

September: I came into parliament in 1999 with a sense of alarm as to what the institution was all about. My expectations have been met in terms of understanding how this huge institution operates. If you do not understand how parliament works then it makes it extremely difficult to engage and influence issues being debated. So what is important is understanding the rules governing parliament and how the various committees work. For example, people who watch the live crossing to parliament on television will generally see proceedings in the national assembly and assume that is the sum total of parliament. The national assembly is the end result of a long decision-making process. As new MPs we had to understand the different entities which make up parliament and how bills are drafted and the process followed until the point where they are voted in. Aside from constantly getting

lost in the various buildings which make up parliament it takes time to get to know the institution.

Bulletin: Do you feel that you played a constructive role as an MP?

September: After taking time to find my way around this puzzle I was lucky to get involved in a number of committees including the parliamentary rules committee which facilitated my development and understanding of the institution. I became a whip in the trade and industry committee which ensured that I played an important part in determining the committee's work programme. Becoming a whip certainly helped in my overall development as people expect you to have a certain level of knowledge. For example, as a whip you have to be familiar with the entry and exit of bills and know when they are being debated and where. If a bill is tabled for debate before your committee you have to ensure that the bill is properly debated and referred through the correct channels not only



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within the national assembly but also the national council of provinces. The process also has to ensure public debate and as the committee whip you have to organise this. In addition, as a whip you are politically responsible for the effective running of the committee. Being appointed a whip provided me with a good opportunity to get a global view of parliament.

Bulletin: *Do you think that Cosatu might have benefited from your time as an MP?*

September: I would like to believe that having come from the labour movement (and always being upfront about my commitment to the labour movement) that I was able to make some contribution in highlighting and representing the ideas and aspirations of workers notwithstanding the possible contradictions that emerge in parliament which represents the interests of all South Africans.

Bulletin: *Do you think that Cosatu benefits from its former leaders being in parliament?*

September: The answer to this depends very much on the capacity of Cosatu to be able to get to all the former labour MPs and also be able to influence members in the various committees debating bills of concern to the federation. Trade unionists who went to parliament in 1994 felt that Cosatu cut them off. I was a Cosatu office bearer at the time and that was not the intention. Having been in the federation and now being in parliament I understand the problems which arose when the initial 20 Cosatu leaders went into parliament in 1994. Some MPs tried to keep a relationship with Cosatu. However, due to the limited capacity in

Cosatu's parliamentary office, the federation is not always able to get to MPs all the time. The parliamentary office remains inadequate to service many of the committees. The office often is unable to inform MPs of Cosatu positions and therefore misses opportunities to influence MPs. There is also not always a co-ordinated attempt to lobby former Cosatu officials in parliament. Unless the federation raises its capacity it will not be able to influence or get involved in the deliberations on the myriad of parliamentary committees.

There is a sense that Cosatu does miss opportunities to influence parliamentarians. Influencing parliamentary committees might not always prove successful as they are multi-party structures. There are however, other structures where Cosatu can influence perceptions and thinking. These include study groups where the ANC meets on its own. Cosatu has made some attempts in the past to educate and communicate its messages with MPs. Where this has been done, it has been welcomed by the MPs.

Bulletin: *Do you think there is space for increased communication and co-operation between Cosatu and MPs?*

September: Increased communication is something that would be welcomed from the side of MPs. At a local level attempts have been made to establish and build relations with Cosatu locals. At a constituency level many of us deal with labour issues on a daily basis. This could provide a perfect opportunity to build relations with Cosatu structures at a local level. It is questionable to what extent this is happening in practice. Whilst shop stewards are overworked and stretched in terms of their work

commitments it is necessary for them to be able to link community and workplace issues.

Bulletin: *How do you now see your role?*

September: I have been unapologetic that I rose through the ranks of the working class. This has guided me in the positions that I have held in various debates. However, when a controversial decision is taken in parliament, it must be understood that parliament is a balance of various different interest groups – with labour being only one of a number. It also needs to be understood that as an ANC MP we must accept decisions taken by the ANC whether highly controversial or not.

Bulletin: *Do you think that the skills learnt in the labour movement assisted you in parliament?*

September: You should really be asking the chairman of my committee. In terms of my role in the trade and industry committee a lot of management skills were required to ensure its effective operation. To some degree the skills learnt in the labour movement assisted me especially during my engagement with the union in parliament. I had an interesting relationship with the union – sometimes I gave them advice and other times I was forced to reprimand them.

One of the downsides of parliament is the fact that they do not spend a lot of money on providing new MPs with the necessary skills to perform effectively. At the end of the day you have to empower yourself as the induction process is insufficient. There are a lot of areas that MPs are not trained in which could ultimately impact on their effectiveness.

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