

# Cosatu Congress 2006

## Zuma or working class power?

Many believed the 9th Cosatu Congress would result in deep divisions in the federation and a significant reshuffling of leadership. Yet despite tensions and some dramatic moments, as **Devan Pillay** highlights, the Congress kept its nose to the ground on key issues around poverty and HIV/AIDS.

The week of the September 2006 Cosatu 9th National Congress at Gallagher Estate, Johannesburg was one of high drama. As delegates sat down to discuss weighty political, socio-economic, international and organisational issues, the theatrics involving ANC Deputy President Jacob Zuma rang through the interstices of the conference programme, competing for attention.

A key sub-plot in this drama revolved around a leadership tussle

between Cosatu President Willie Madisha, and the General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi. The Vavi camp included SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande – seen by many as the play-master in the background. They seemed to encourage misleading portrayals of the battle as that between a ‘pro-Zuma’ camp led by Vavi and a ‘pro-Mbeki camp’ led by Madisha.

To add to the drama was a slap in the face for Deputy President Pumzile Mlambo-Ncguka during a morning dedicated to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. As the deputy president walked towards the podium to give her address, a large number of delegates burst out in song condemning her husband, former head of the National Prosecutions Authority, Bulelani Ncguka, for his treatment of Zuma. Delegates also politely asked Minister of Provincial and Local Government Sydney Mufamadi, a former Cosatu deputy general-secretary, who interrupted proceedings with a long-winded defence of government policy, to cut short his intervention.

From the first day, when Zuma was enthusiastically welcomed to the Congress, it seemed like it was going to be all about him. The dismissal of Zuma’s corruption trial during the week caused the congress to erupt into a frenzy of adulation. Vavi was delirious, and insisted that Zuma come and address the Congress delegates. Delegates waited patiently for what many believe is their candidate for ANC president. To them the court

dismissal proved that there was a ‘political conspiracy’ against Zuma. There was, it seemed, nothing to stop him now, and when he finally arrived the congress hall erupted. Zuma seemed on his way to the presidency.

Cosatu leaders, however, were at pains to explain that the congress was never really about Zuma. For them, it was primarily about how this 1.8 million strong organisation of workers was going to ensure that working class interests took precedence during the on-going ‘national democratic revolution’, as captured in the Congress slogan: “Consolidating working class power – for intensification of the Jobs and Poverty campaign”.

### PERSISTENT POVERTY AND RISING INEQUALITY

The Congress came amidst damning evidence that, after 12 years of democracy, poverty levels have not dropped, and social inequality is rising rapidly. The Secretariat Report gave a comprehensive analysis of the state of the economy. Whilst GDP growth has risen to just below 5%, this has had only a marginal impact on job creation. Unemployment remains at just below 30% (or just below 40% if the expanded definition that includes discouraged job-seekers is taken). Cosatu’s discussion document *Possibilities for Social Change* surveys the latest research on poverty and inequality and concludes that workers’ share of the national income has declined, while profits have increased.

In other words, even those with jobs have experienced declining real incomes, with 17% earning less than R500 a month, a third less than R1 000 a month and almost two-thirds less than R2 500 a month. These are what Cosatu calls the working poor, and stands in contrast to the R56m the CEO of Shoprite-Checkers earned in 2005.

Poverty as a whole remains at between 40% and 50% of the population. According to the discussion document, "poverty probably increased between 1996 and 2001, but declined marginally thereafter". This marginal decline can be attributed to increased social spending since 2000, particularly in the form of social grants. About 40% of households now get child support, old age pensions and disability grants – but at a very low level.

Crime and HIV/AIDS has ravaged the population, with a dramatic increase in the number of deaths amongst young adults. In 1997, says the Secretariat Report, "most adults in South Africa died when they were over 60. By 2000 most adults were dying in their 20s, 30s and 40s". This reflects a major social crisis facing

the country.

In the midst of this crisis, Cosatu members have not witnessed a sense of urgency from government. Indeed, Cosatu is still angry about the way it was ignored when government adopted the Gear [Growth Employment & Redistribution] macro-economic policy in 1996. This violated a key principle of participatory democracy, and undermined the alliance between the ANC, Cosatu and the SACP. While Cosatu has had influence in certain policy processes, most particularly around labour legislation and privatisation, its proposals around a more expansive developmental path have largely been dismissed by government.

Instead, Cosatu has witnessed government failing to tackle the social deficit of wealth concentrated in few hands, whilst the majority wallow in squalor. Its 'developmental trajectory' seems more oriented towards the deracialisation of the upper classes. This includes the nurturing of a new black elite, including many former champions of the working class, whose main interest seems to be to compete



*Sasbo delegates*



*A person living with AIDS addresses the Cosatu Congress watched from behind by Deputy President Mlambo Ngcuka and TAC's Zackie Achmat*

with the established white elite in conspicuous consumption.

### **COSATU RESOLVES...**

The Congress adopted a more assertive mood against government policies and actions. It devoted half a

### **MADISHA AND WORKERS' CONTROL**

Whatever spin one gives to the Congress, the run-up was dominated by the spat between Cosatu's president and general-secretary. The tussle, in part, concerned Cosatu's founding principle of putting worker leadership and worker control at the forefront of its manner of operation. Apart from strong shop steward participation from below, this meant a certain balance of power between the president, who is always a worker, and the general-secretary, who runs the federation on a full-time basis.

It seems that differences emerged over which position has precedence over the other. Other differences, including Madisha's more independent view

regarding Cosatu's relationship with Zuma, seem to have compounded matters. Madisha had all along insisted that he was neither anti-Zuma nor anti-Mbeki, but pro-ANC. He wanted to do what was best for the working class, and for ANC – the vehicle for liberation.

The tussle took the form of a challenge to Madisha's presidency by Zanoxolo Wayile, president of Cosatu Eastern Cape region and of the National Union of Metalworkers of SA (Numsa). When nominations were made, Numsa rose to declare their opposition to Wayile's nomination for president. They had earlier taken a resolution to support the re-election of all the current office-bearers, including Madisha as president.

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) had nominated Wayile, and they insisted that the Cosatu constitution allowed them to do so.

If the Zuma train, driven by Vavi and Nzimande, seemed unstoppable, the re-election of Willie Madisha as Cosatu president slowed it down a bit. The voting went along regional lines, with the southern and coastal regions tending to vote for Zanoxolo, whilst the northern regions voted Madisha, who hails from that part of the country. In a close vote, just over half the delegates rejected Wayile in favour of Madisha. In addition, a resolution designed to give the general secretary more powers in relation to the president was defeated.



Just over half of the delegates returned Willie Madisha as president

day to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, ensuring that government shared a platform with AIDS activists, and made firmer commitments towards dealing with the scourge. It gave awards to Zakkie Achmat, president of the Treatment Action Campaign, and Lucky Mazibuko, a journalist and AIDS activist. Achmat used the opportunity to call for the dismissal of the health minister, Manto Tshabalala. He sought Cosatu's support for this call, but the federation did not get round to discussing it.

Indeed, so distracted was the Congress by the theatrics surrounding Zuma, that it only got through 30 out of 118 resolutions. Key resolutions, including those related to organisational matters, were deferred to the next Central Executive Committee (CEC). In addition, a worrying sign for some delegates was the fact that only a few top officials from most affiliates, particularly the president or general secretary, participated in the debates. Worker participation, said one former unionist, seemed to be at its lowest level. Indeed, Cosatu's own organisational renewal document points to increased bureaucratisation and oligarchy within the federation.

Nevertheless, Cosatu still showed that it was interested in a range of weighty issues facing the country.

## RECRUITMENT: SLIGHTLY INCREASED MEMBERSHIP

In 2003 Cosatu adopted a recruitment drive to boost its flagging membership. Progress amongst affiliates has been disappointing, although a few, most notably Satawu (SA Transport & Allied Workers Union) (59 000), Numsa (43 000) and Popcru (Police & Prisons Civil Rights Union) (29 000) have increased their membership since 2003. After a decline from 2000 to 2003, total membership increased by 5% since then, bringing it back to the 2000 level of 1.8 million members. Union density is about 36% of the workforce (i.e. 3 million union members out of 8.5 million employed persons), and of that 60% belong to Cosatu affiliates. Cosatu has a target of 4 million members by 2015.

Cosatu affiliates remain largely located amongst permanent, core workers. Those in atypical employment, including sub-contracted, part-time and casualised labour, as well those in the informal sector and the unemployed, remain out of the Cosatu orbit. This weakens its ability to represent the broader working class.

As Vavi told the *Sunday Times* (24/9/06): "If we don't do organisational development and renewal...in each and every union...if we don't get better coordination and solidarity between permanent workers and casual workers and the unemployed, we are doomed."

### Membership from 1991 to 2006 (rounded to thousands)

Union	1991	1994	1997	2000	2003	2006
CEPPWAWU	88,000	78,000	94,000	74,000	65,000	62,000
CWU	21,000	23,000	40,000	35,000	32,000	25,000
DENOSA	n.a	n.a	73,000	70,000	71,000	64,000
FAWU	129,000	121,000	140,000	119,000	119,000	115,000
MUSA	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	1,000
NEHAWU	18,000	64,000	163,000	235,000	235,000	204,000
NUM	270,000	311,000	311,000	290,000	279,000	262,000
NUMSA	273,000	170,000	220,000	200,000	173,000	217,000
PAWE	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	400
PAWUSA	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	17,000
POPCRU	n.a	n.a	45,000	71,000	67,000	96,000
SAAPAWU	n.a	n.a	29,000	22,000	22,000	n.a
SACCAWU	97,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	102,000	108,000
SACTWU	186,000	150,000	150,000	120,000	105,000	110,000
SADNU	n.a	n.a	n.a	8,000	8,000	9,000
SADTU	n.a	59,000	146,000	219,000	215,000	224,000
SAFPU	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	1,000
SAMA	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	n.a	5,000
SAMWU	60,000	100,000	117,000	120,000	120,000	118,000
SASAWU	n.a	n.a	n.a	18,000	18,000	9,000
SASBO	n.a	n.a	70,000	63,000	63,000	61,000
SATAWU	70,000	74,000	91,000	103,000	74,000	133,000

PAWUSA affiliated to COSATU in November 2004 with a membership of 18 000.

In the past three years, POPCRU, SADNU, SADTU, NUMSA and especially SATAWU saw significant growth. Virtually all the other unions lost members. In contrast, in the three years to the 8th National Congress, virtually every union recorded a decline in membership. The following table shows the change in union membership since the 7th Congress.

The Congress prioritised critical resolutions around socio-economic and political issues. Of particular note is the re-assertion of the ANC alliance's Freedom Charter as a point of reference. A number of resolutions reinvoked the Charter's economic clause, downplayed by the ANC, which calls for the commanding heights of the economy to be nationalised. One resolution, sponsored by Nehawu (National Education Health & Allied Workers Union), went as far as calling for nationalisation of key economic assets and workers' cooperatives as alternatives to black economic empowerment, whether 'broad-based' or not.

The proposed resolution explicitly described current BEE policies as aiming to "replace white monopoly capital with a non-racial monopoly capital over a number of years, thus entrenching ownership of wealth of the country in the hands of the few at the expense of the majority".

Samwu (SA Municipal Workers Union) and Sasbo (The Finance Union) supported the withdrawal of an alternative resolution emphasising racial, as opposed to class, inequalities. This resolution, sponsored by Numsa and Sactwu (SA Clothing & Textile Workers Union), called for the retention of a broad-based BEE strategy, but with more safeguards against workers' exploitation. A compromise was reached whereby a 2003 resolution on BEE would be amended to reflect these concerns, while the resolution on nationalisation was adopted separately.

Cosatu was clearly not in a position to abandon BEE completely. Indeed, many affiliates' investment companies are involved in BEE deals, as well as individual union leaders at various levels. This underlined the persistent schizophrenia over

Cosatu's socialist goals, and its compromises with capitalism. However, if BEE continues to enrich a few individuals, the drift towards more radical socio-economic proposals is likely to continue.

#### BACKTRACKING ON ZUMA?

The relative marginalisation of Cosatu and the SACP in the alliance has generated much anger and distrust amongst organised workers. When President Mbeki accused Cosatu and SACP leaders of being 'ultra-left' after an anti-privatisation strike in 2002, relations were at their lowest ebb. Speculation was rife that Mbeki was raising the stakes, and preparing for a split in the alliance. Eventually he backed down, with Zuma reportedly being a key player behind the scenes smoothing over the cracks.

Cosatu has since then seen Zuma as a potential ally within the ANC leadership, and when in 2003 he was accused of corruption, without being charged, Cosatu leapt to his defence. He was invited to address the federation's 2003 Congress, and greeted with great enthusiasm – in stark contrast to the respectful but lukewarm reception given to Mbeki.

The theatre surrounding Zuma at the 2006 Congress seemed to seal support for Zuma as the country's next president. The only question remaining on the minds of sceptics was: did Cosatu and the SACP have a plan to ensure that Zuma will adopt a pro-poor agenda, or was it a case of hope and pray?

Zuma, however, did not rise to the occasion. His speech to the Congress was bland, and his re-affirmation of the government's economic trajectory ran counter to the new mood in Cosatu. His suggestion that he would keep Trevor Manuel, who in 1996 said "Gear is non-negotiable" as finance minister, also did not go down well. Indeed, it moved Vavi,

who in 2005 said only a 'tsunami' would stop Zuma from becoming president, to raise a few concerns.

Tellingly, Vavi told the *Sunday Times* (24/9/06) that support for Zuma as victim must be separated from support for him as the future president. Indeed, neither Cosatu nor the SACP has made a formal decision to support Zuma for president. Whilst in the past this assertion could be interpreted as a mere technicality (formal nominations for ANC president only happen next year), in light of recent events it takes on a new meaning.

Unless Zuma pulls a rabbit out of the hat and makes clear left-leaning promises, support for him as presidency cannot be taken for granted. As Vavi said, "he still has to say more about his thinking. If I advise workers that this is the way they should go, I must be absolutely certain that I am not going to live to regret that".

If it is unclear whether Zuma is as economically conservative as Mbeki, then it is patently clear that he is much more conservative on social issues. His utterances on women and HIV/AIDS during his rape trial early in 2006, showed what a traditionalist he is. His homophobic utterances during a Heritage Day commemoration a few days after the Cosatu Congress shocked his supporters. The ANC Youth League distanced itself from his remarks, and *Weekender* columnist Vukani Mde asked: "I wonder how many times a man has to apologise for stupidity before we declare him to be the weakest link."

Indeed. Once the weakest link is removed, hopefully a clearer, more focussed strategy towards working class power will emerge.

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