



## FEDSAL conference: *the difficulty of change*

By ZOLILE MTSHELWANE

**T**he Federation of SA Labour, the self-styled "moderate voice" of labour, is experiencing rumblings from within over its future direction. This was evident at its annual conference held in Pretoria on 31 August.

Nearly 140 delegates from 16 affiliates sat in stunned silence when Ben Smith urged FEDSAL to join the mainstream trade union movement, a reference to COSATU. Smith is the general secretary of SA Society of Bank Officials (SASBO), the biggest affiliate of FEDSAL with 80 000 members.

"FEDSAL must join the mainstream of trade unionism, or risk being reduced to irrelevance," Smith said. He went on to say that the experience and expertise that FEDSAL possesses can be of great benefit to unions in COSATU.

SASBO has also made its intention clear: they have resolved to affiliate to COSATU, thereby robbing FEDSAL of its most important affiliate. Although Smith's paper on trade union

unity was to be followed by discussion, this did not materialise. Instead, it was decided that this issue be referred to the National Executive Committee or a subcommittee of this structure for debate and decision.

This was the only climax of a conference that was dominated by muted debate and dressed up delegates, the overwhelming majority of whom were white Afrikaner males. There was, however, a sprinkling of black delegates, most of whom came from SASBO.

The conference also discussed, behind closed doors, the image of FEDSAL. According to Ben van der Walt, the president of FEDSAL, conference looked at the federation's present position and how it should position itself in the changing climate within which trade unions operate. "We debated where the federation is at now, and looked at future options that are available to us," Van der Walt said. He added that this debate was an internal matter for FEDSAL and its unions. But, according to a source who was at this closed session, contributions from delegates reflected the anxiety of a class that feels threatened about its privileged status, thanks to

years of apartheid and white domination.

Other speakers at the conference were Ali Ibrahim from the ILO's Bureau for Workers Activities. Ibrahim spoke about the role of the ILO in promoting and reinforcing workers rights.

An unexplained speaker was a human resources manager of the National Sorghum Breweries, Ray Kwatsha, who spoke on "challenges facing management and labour in the new SA". Kwatsha faced a barrage of tough questions from mainly SASBO's black delegates. One of these could be described as a "hostile" questioner who wanted to know whether NSB is really black-owned, or the black management was only fronting for white owners.

Van der Walt argued that it was important to have a representative of a black-owned enterprise to share their views with FEDSAL. "It was useful to hear what black employers think about issues like affirmative action and how they see labour relations developing in South Africa."

Besides Ibrahim, there were three other international guests. There were two from the AFL-CIO and another one from the World Confederation of Labour. COSATU and NACTU also sent representatives to the open sessions of the conference.

In his opening address, Ben van der Walt said the SA Telcom Association has affiliated to the federation since the last conference. Van der Walt added that FEDSAL's membership currently stands at 260 000. He went on to state that FEDSAL has participated in a number of forums like the NEF and the NMC. "FEDSAL is now recognised as an important actor in the labour field," van der Walt said, and mentioned overseas visits that FEDSAL's delegates undertook together with COSATU and NACTU representatives to the ILO's conference as well as visits to unions in the USA.

Van der Walt said he is convinced that FEDSAL has a potential for growth. But, he said, the federation's leadership which is presently white-dominated will have to change if it wants to attract a growing number of non-white workers and unions. He also called on the federation's affiliates to support and actively participate in the government's RDP. "By doing so FEDSAL will enhance the RDP's impact on the lives of the poor and unemployed."

Van der Walt also said FEDSAL supports the

effective implementation of a national public works programme and other measures to improve the situation of the poor and unemployed.

Three office-bearers were elected for a one-year term at the end of the conference. These are: Ben van der Walt was re-elected president; Mary Malete was elected 1st vice-president; Renier de Waal is 2nd vice-president.

The general secretary and his assistant are appointed positions, and they are, respectively: Dannhauser van der Merwe and Corrie du Plooy.

FEDSAL has no position of treasurer, its finances are handled by a finance committee of five people who are appointed by the NEC.

The rumblings by SASBO about FEDSAL's direction are bound to have a great impact on the federation. Although SASBO's disaffiliation from FEDSAL was not discussed at the conference, it seems like a certainty that cannot be reversed. When, and not if, this eventually happens, it will leave a big dent on FEDSAL's image and future prospect of attracting black unions. FEDSAL's loss will be COSATU's gain, thereby putting a strain on the informal relationship that has been developed between the two federations.

In his concluding remarks, Smith quoted an old cliché about being in the middle of the road: "When you are in the middle of the road, you run the risk of being run over." The responses of some delegates to Smith's words was that there should be a confederation of labour unions as opposed to a unified trade union movement.

Van der Walt said it would be sad when SASBO eventually leaves FEDSAL. "SASBO has members who have a lot of expertise that has been useful for FEDSAL. But I don't see their leaving FEDSAL necessarily affecting our potential of attracting other (black) unions into our fold," said Van der Walt. He added that FEDSAL's black membership is growing, and he estimates this at around 30%.

It remains to be seen whether FEDSAL will withstand the loss of one of its biggest affiliates, and whether the move by SASBO will lead to other unions reconsidering their position in FEDSAL. ☆