

Fedusa

becoming the rainbow federation

Fedusa's third national congress, held in September, revealed a trade union federation on the move to becoming a truly multiracial organisation. The **Labour Bulletin** reports on some of the more interesting sights and sounds of the congress and resolutions adopted.

Getting to the venue for the Fedusa congress – Gold Reef City – took some level of commitment. For some of the more important dignitaries such as Public Enterprise Minister Alec Erwin and Reserve Bank Governor Tito Mboweni it took not only commitment, but high levels of persuasion to get the complex security to ensure their access.

Having finally reached the congress venue, a number of surprises awaited.

The first was seeing Fedusa General Secretary Chez Milani helping the congress organisers to get delegates registered so as to prevent any delays and the second was the composition of delegates. It is estimated that about 85% of delegates at the congress were black. A rather unusual sight if

compared to Fedusa's first and even second congress held in 2002. The congress revealed that the federation, by virtue of its membership, is changing despite the predominantly white leadership. This is unlikely to remain a feature as one source noted that black members indicated they had their 'eye' on the podium (where the leadership sat).

Hence, the congress revealed an interesting mix of cultures and traditions ranging from *toyi toyi* and singing with raised fists to a rather corporate video of Fedusa and a problematic MC who frequently shouted out 'Vivaa Fedusa Vivaa' and seemed unable to correctly pronounce speakers' names or their titles for that matter.

Looking beyond the podium and the MC, one could easily be mistaken for believing that one was at a Cosatu rather than a Fedusa congress. On the surface there appeared to be a convergence in terms of the profile of membership. In fact interviews with one or two union leaders revealed that a number of Fedusa members (now in unions such as Hospersa) had previously been within the ranks of Cosatu.

CONGRESS PROCEEDINGS

Milani kicked off the proceedings with his secretariat report, which revealed that the federation, while having lost members through retrenchments (as has been the case with other federations) has sought to keep its membership base constant through mergers and attracting new unions to join. This strategy has ensured that the number of affiliates has grown to 26 with a membership of 544 990 as compared to 287 452 in 2002. At its peak the federation claimed a membership of 570 000 in 2000. Milani anticipates a Fedusa of over 1.2 million members in the event of the merger with Nactu and a number of independents,

including Consawu. As Milani addressed the question of the merger, a Nactu delegation arrived at the congress to much applause.

Aside from outlining the general activities of the federation over the last year, Milani highlighted some of the challenges facing unions, which included a growing lack of respect for union rights – hence the need to continue to defend and extend worker rights. Fedusa, he said, would not support any attempt to reduce or water down existing worker rights. In terms of the proposed review of labour laws, unions, he said, could never be expected to agree to an erosion of worker rights, as that would be contrary to the very core of their existence.

Other challenges related to the worldwide decline of union membership, which he addressed in terms of the federations' plan to merge with Nactu and a number of independent unions. Unemployment, growing casualisation, widespread restructuring and retrenchments, high levels of HIV/AIDS and a lack of skills and capacity within the labour market constituted some of the other challenges facing organised labour, he said.

'In order to succeed in overcoming these challenges we will need a greater sense of common purpose and cooperation between affiliates than was previously the case,' he said. He acknowledged however, that unions 'now have to compete more vigorously with each other for membership, in the interests of continued survival.' While this type of strategy may have limited membership benefits for certain affiliates in the short term, it will have a destabilising effect and weaken the federation over the medium term, if not kept in check.

RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED

Aside from the resolution on trade union unity (covered in the previous *Labour Bulletin*), congress adopted a number of interesting resolutions:

- trade union reporting (in terms of the Labour Relations Act)
- protecting our democracy
- revitalise retirement funds
- social health insurance
- land reform
- promoting maths and science in schools
- national water resource strategy
- environmental and occupational health and safety
- national framework agreement (NFA) and restructuring state-owned enterprises
- reducing the cost of red tape
- knowing your HIV status
- strengthening organising capacity
- women for unions
- sexual harassment
- unemployment.

The resolution relating to compliance by unions in terms of their reporting obligations as outlined by the LRA raised some interesting issues. The resolution noted that a large number of unions have not been complying with their financial reporting requirements. The federation believed that an integral link should exist between financial reporting and the membership figures claimed by unions. In view of this, the federation resolved that it would request the registrar of labour relations at the department to ensure that unions and federations include audited membership figures as part of their annual financial reporting requirements.

On the question of protecting our democracy, the federation noted on the one hand that the country's democracy 'may' be endangered by insufficient political competition, which increases the risk of a succession crisis, but on the other hand the dominance of the ANC has brought the stability needed to consolidate new democratic institutions.

It was also noted that parliament has not played a strong enough policy and

oversight role and has become a rubberstamp of the executive. It was therefore, resolved that the political activities of the executive and parliament should be monitored to ensure that the values of the Constitution are not undermined.

NEW OFFICE BEARERS

As is the norm at union congresses, some tense moments were experienced around the election of new office bearers. In terms of the federations' policy, the general secretary position is not an elected one. However, the positions of the president and deputies are. Current president Mary Maletse (Hospersa) was re-elected as was the case with the deputy president Koos Bezuidenhout (UASA). The unions were, however, divided over the election of the three vice-presidents, with two blocs emerging: PSA and Imatu voting together and Hospersa and Uasa on the other side. The three new vice-presidents elected were Sayeda Khan (PSA); Danie Carstens (Imatu) and Roderick Williams (PSA).

While no announcement was made during the congress, some speculation emerged as to whether Milani had planned to resign as general secretary of Fedusa. It later emerged that he has resigned and plans to leave the federation by December. Milani has been instrumental in building the federations' profile and positioning it within government circles.

Milani joined the federation at a critical point in its evolution. The federation reconstituted itself out of the ranks of Fedsal, which was seen to be a predominantly white conservative organisation. Over the years Milani has been at the helm of the organisations' transformation. He recalls the attitudes prevalent in the organisation at the time of his appointment in 1997. 'Transformation

does not happen on its own, initially it has to be forced and then the momentum carries itself', he says. Milani acknowledges that over the last two to three years transformation has really become more evident with more integration taking place in the ranks of the organisation.

Milani believes that the federation has evolved to the point where it is taking its rightful place and is coming of age. He is of the view that he has proven his sceptics wrong when media reports stated eight years ago that Fedusa could not become an alternative to Cosatu. Having brought the federation to the point where it has transformed and is poised to merge with a number of other organisations, Milani has tendered his resignation and is moving down to the Eastern Cape where he will continue working within the labour movement. His decision is based on a desire to work more at the grassroots and to return to his first love – the sea. Having the wind and water, he will hopefully fly, but the critical question for Fedusa is will it fly if Milani is not replaced with a person of substance and political gravitas who can take the federation forward into a critical merger process.