

From the floor

COSATU congress delegates speak

COSATU held a special congress in Midrand from 18 to 20 August 1999. During the congress, I spoke to some delegates to get their views on a range of issues (see box on page 56). The quotes below represent what these workers know and think, and have not been checked for accuracy with individual unions and companies and are not necessarily representative of their unions' or federation's views.

On the congress...

Mkhalipi: I am happy with the congress. The more exposure I get, the more I understand how a congress is managed. Although I am impressed with how we are conducting the congress, I am sceptical about the process itself. We argue about the procedures rather than content. We have representative structures in the federation that look at process. Still, process is only approved during the congress. As a result, some of us who are not participating feel locked out and we run into time problems.

Kbumalo: The procedures are part of the congress, but to put more emphasis on procedures than resolutions won't be good. Yet you cannot overlook the procedures because then someone can be out of line.

Fortuin: The participation is good. Some people, who don't participate openly, do

Etienne Vlok spoke to delegates to get their views on congress issues and challenges facing their unions and the federation.

so in caucuses and did in the preparation for the congress.

James: This congress is sitting at a very crucial moment in our history as the working class. We are experiencing massive job loss for which the federation should develop a strategy. If we don't, it will weaken or even wipe out the federation. What is crucial is to translate resolutions into action. We should engage in massive campaigns and, as suggested by the SACP general secretary, have public hearings in Parliament around job losses.

On job loss...

Mogano: Fighting job losses must be one of our campaigns. It is a terrible thing and will weaken our federation. The bosses are happy with it because it destroys the labour movement.

Marais: In the last three years we have experienced lots of retrenchments at Union Spinning Mills and unfortunately I was part of the negotiations. It was not nice seeing workers lose their jobs. It has

become a trend at our company to retrench almost every year. In about 1995 the company employed 1 500 workers. It has fallen to 860. COSATU should organise a two-month programme where we try to stop job losses. It should include the question of tariffs.

Mkalipi: We have been experiencing job losses at SA Fine Worsteds for a long time. When I started in 1989, we were 900 to 1 000 employees. We are currently only 500. If we continue like this we will be on our way to our death. The perception that job loss is because of the new government, is not true. It is rather because of

international circumstances. However, this does not mean that, as SACTWU, we must not do anything because it is a global disease. We need to look at our own circumstances in relation to international markets and adjust our policy accordingly. We are no longer an individual country that is inwardly focused. The time for conflicts with management is over. We are facing a common enemy, but management fails to realise this. Put them at the level of an ordinary worker and let them understand that the union policies are not causing the problems. But we will not save any jobs unless we get 100% backing from the government.

Workers interviewed

Gilbert Mogano – CEPPWAWU shopsteward at SA Druggists in Pietersburg. He has been to a few union congresses and was with CWIU for 12 years before it merged to become CEPPWAWU.

Sam Lefuwa – TGWU shopsteward at Pickfords Removals in Johannesburg. He has been to seven union congresses and has been with TGWU since 1985. He is the national chairperson of the goods sector.

Melville Marals – SACTWU shopsteward in the Eastern Cape at Union Spinning Mills. He has been with SACTWU for five years and this is his second COSATU congress.

Monroe Mkalipi – SACTWU shopsteward at SA Fine Worsteds in the Western Cape. He has been with SACTWU since its inception in 1989 and before that in the unions that led to SACTWU. This is his sixth COSATU congress.

Faith Modise – SACTWU shopsteward at Gregory Knitting Mills in Gauteng. She has been with SACTWU for almost 13 years and has attended all the congresses since the formation of COSATU in 1985.

Themba Khumalo – SACTWU shopsteward at Extruded Fabrics in KwaZulu-Natal. He has been with SACTWU for eleven years and has attended six union congresses.

Freddie Fortuin – FAWU branch secretary at the Boland branch. He was a shopsteward for 16 years

and has been an official for one and a half years. This is his first COSATU congress.

Sihle Mnguni – SADTU shopsteward in the Eastern Cape at S'thembiso Secondary. He has been with SADTU since its inception and serves in the regional executive committee. This is his second COSATU congress.

Mzwakhe Clay – SADTU shopsteward in the Eastern Cape at TK Zondi Primary. He has been with SADTU since its inception in 1990. This is his first COSATU congress.

Caroline Brown – CEPPWAWU shopsteward in the Western Cape at Warner Lambert. She was formerly with CWIU for six years and this is her first COSATU congress.

Irvn Jim – NUMSA shopsteward at Firestone in the Eastern Cape. He has been with NUMSA for almost five years and this is his third COSATU congress.

Tyoty James – NUM shopsteward at Bambanani Mine in the Free State. He has been with NUM since 1985 and has attended four COSATU congresses.

Mondy Mlatshe – NEHAWU shopsteward at the Department of Welfare in the Eastern Cape. He has been with NEHAWU since 1991 and this is his third congress.

Pam Harris – NEHAWU shopsteward at the Department of Housing in the Western Cape. She has been a shopsteward since NEHAWU got recognised in the public sector. This is her second COSATU congress.

Modise: There are job losses at Gregory. It is because government cuts tariffs every year, so local clothing manufacturers can buy from outside. In South Africa we are not yet ready to restructure our companies because people need to be taught new skills. I would be happy if the government, before it signs any agreement, consults us as the union.

Kbumalo: When I started at Extruded Fabrics there were about 2 000 workers but today we are much less. This shows that we are losing the battle against job losses. Government should also be involved because the problems are illegal imports and tariffs. The speed with which tariffs are reduced is making a big dent in our industries. We don't say we should have walls but we should talk about how to break down the walls.

On the most serious issues at the workplace...

Mogano: The most serious issue is that bosses in Pietersburg do not want to participate in centralised bargaining. We need to get them to bargain centrally like we do around South Africa.

Lefuwa: Many companies are going into voluntary liquidation. It is not because they do not have resources but it is to destroy the labour movement. It is retrenchment in disguise. You might find a company going for voluntary liquidation but the next day it is operating again. The workers are thrown out in the street and can't be employed there again because it



Delegates at the congress.

is supposed to be a different company. Government needs to change the Insolvency Act to make it very difficult for employers to go for voluntary liquidation.

Mnguni: Currently, what is frustrating teachers is that many of them are substitutes and have not received their salaries since the beginning of the year. SADTU also takes care of the retired teachers but most of them have not received their pensions since 1997. In the rural area conditions are not conducive to learning. Nevertheless, teachers are still committed under those conditions.

Clay: An issue that affects the whole province is the availability of basic resources. The things that normally make schools run, are scarce. This is coupled to the reduced spending by the government as advocated by the macro-economic policy.

Brown: Accepting the culture of CEPPWAWU compared with the sweetheart union that was there before is difficult for Warner Lambert. But I am fighting a lot. I told Warner Lambert that if it is necessary, I will stay there until I am 60 to get it to be what the other companies are. The managers at Warner Lambert are still racist. I have tried to meet its board because I wanted to express myself directly to them.

Some managers are experiencing the same problem. The other problem is that the company projects a good image outside. We don't say that it must not support social issues outside, but we believe charity begins at home. The company needs to recognise workers as well. Warner Lambert is so big today because of the workers. Okay, they have got the medical and research people but at the end of the day it is the ordinary worker, the working class that works on the ground and packs the stuff.

Jim: Since 1997 restructuring has affected my factory. This takes place within the framework of globalisation and the need to be competitive. Our approach is to engage in globalisation, and we have managed to defend several jobs. It is critical for trade unions to engage with globalisation and restructuring on the shopfloor because companies overload workers. It does not mean that because a worker is still standing, he can still do more work.

James: It is restructuring and secondly, working costs. Bambanani is the pillar of Anglo Gold concerning ore reserves, but the gold price has not been in our favour. The proposed sale of gold reserves by the IMF and the British Treasury is going to hurt that mine in particular and the industry overall.

Mlatsba: We are faced with the problem of having to transform management, membership and the institution. The difficulty is with management. We have national agreements on transformation, but management is not aware of it. When we engage them, they oppose it. We then take the issue to our provincial leaders who take it up with the premiers and the MECs who then give direct orders to the regional and local management.

Harris: One has to understand the politics of the Western Cape with its coalition government. Putting our issues on the table is very difficult for us as a progressive organisation. Still, we will be fighting tooth and nail to transform that province and its institutions.

On Section 189 of the LRA...

Marais: I am in favour of it being changed from 'consultation' to 'negotiation' when retrenching. The change will have a slight impact. Even if employers negotiate instead of consult with unions there is no guarantee that people won't lose their jobs. However, we would understand better why they want to retrench. Currently there is a perception that employers just retrench for peanuts.

Lefuwa: It needs to be changed because we feel that it is not serving our interests. We made major sacrifices for this LRA with the hope that it will serve us. But somewhere, somehow it became our enemy.

Modise: The LRA, more specifically Section 189, is contributing to job losses. I see that employers are abusing it. It should be used when a business restructures but now the employers use it to retrench workers to make more money. Then they hire people on a casual or contract basis.



Zwelinzima Vavi, newly-elected COSATU general secretary.

On the alliance...

Lefuwa: I am very happy with it. As alliance partners, no one can stand on its own without the others. Because our democracy is so young we can't even consider breaking the alliance. The only thing is that we have to consolidate and strengthen our discussions within the alliance.

Marais: I am in favour of it. It can be improved. You know within the alliance some individuals would like to see the alliance split. I think those individuals need to be dealt with and disciplined. They are either promoting their own self-interest or do not understand the alliance.

Modise: We are not happy with the way it is going. It should be improved by having a proper programme from the alliance on how to discuss issues. I would not want to see the alliance break because as workers and ANC members we need to support the

ANC government. But we need a proper programme to run the alliance.

Fortuin: There is room for improvement. Maybe, as explained by one comrade, we must go back and look at ourselves. Sometimes we forget that there is a problem with ourselves. I welcome the fact that we have raised it here.

Muguni: We are very happy with the alliance because it can define areas of weakness. The challenge that is facing the alliance now is how it addresses areas of weakness, in particular co-ordination within it. Beginning here, we have to address how the alliance co-ordinates its affairs. We are still convinced that the alliance is as relevant as before.

Clay: We have a common objective as the various components of the alliance. The specific tactics to reach that objective might be something that we continuously discuss in the alliance. Obviously, debates

are healthy and take place in the alliance. We make sure that we debate issues so that finally we all agree on the way to change conditions for people in our country.

Jim: I believe that the alliance needs to continue. What is a challenge to the federation is 'how do we influence and shape policies?'. It is critical for this federation and the entire working class to be in the ANC structures and play an active role in them. We need to ensure that the policy direction and the kind of policies that the ANC government is developing continue to be biased towards the working class.

James: This alliance is historic. It was not forced onto us. We forged it at the battlefield. Therefore, this alliance should continue. We can improve on the interaction so that what we do is a collective action by the alliance partners. It is not COSATU deciding on a particular course of action at the exclusion of the others or vice versa.

Mlatsba: The question of the relevance of the alliance is out. People who are interested in such a question are those outside the alliance who would want to see it break up. The only way the alliance can improve is by having a code of conduct to discipline those individuals who want to move outside the alliance to make public statements. Thus, you don't get an ANC member criticising COSATU in public or a COSATU member criticising the ANC.

On casuals and subcontracting...

Khumalo: It is an area in which COSATU could be stronger. Employers do not employ casuals to create jobs but to make

more profits. They retrench workers and then take those same workers on a casual or contract basis. This congress should be strong on how to overcome this issue.

Brown: We are experiencing problems with temporary workers and subcontracting. The company was busy interviewing people to establish a pool of contract workers. Yet they did not speak to us, as shopstewards, about it. I am going to gun them down because they were supposed to involve us before they did the interviews.

James: Subcontracting is a trend anywhere in the mining industry. As part of our fight against it, we have developed an agreement with management in line with our national agreement with the Chamber of Mines. It stipulates which contractors should come to the mine and under which conditions. The national agreement stipulates clearly that we only allow contractors if they do specialised work that the miners are not able to do, such as grouting and shaft sinking. If we allow subcontractors to do the direct mining it will wipe out the NUM.

On GEAR...

Mnguni: The union has condemned the move by the state that ignores spending in particular on education as a social service. SADTU has said to the department: 'Don't neglect us when you address issues of budget because if we are able to make our inputs, we can address delivery within the boundaries of the limited resources.' Unfortunately, this has not happened. Concerning the current strike, one of our concerns was that when the budget is completed, the issue of salary increases is also completed. When we then raise issues such as salary increases at the bargaining table, we have to do that within the confines of that budget. Had we been part



Melville Marais (right), SACTWU shopsteward at Gregory Knitting Mills.

of the drafting of that budget (with all its constraints) we would understand what we can manage and what not. Up to now educators are not convinced that the money is limited because of how government has handled the setup.

Jim: We can't afford to have a state that plays a minimal role in the country. One of the things that we are arguing in this congress is that the state needs to have a vigorous programme to turn things around. In the rural areas you need a parastatal that will serve the community in different ways. However, that can't be done if you have a state that focuses on creating an environment for investors. What drives investors are profits, not job creation. In the past five years we have made progress in those areas where the state has lead us. This qualifies the argument of the federation that the state needs to intervene in the economy.

Harris: The macro-economic policy says that there needs to be a cut in public spending. We are seeing the effects of this in our workplaces where areas are being privatised and outsourced. It affects us severely and as a federation we need to come up with something to deal with it.

On the public sector dispute...

Clay: We are completely taken aback by the manner in which government is concluding this issue around salaries. We don't believe that it is the best way to conclude any bargaining process, especially if there is serious disagreement. Yesterday congress made it clear that government is setting a wrong precedent for the private sector - that if you disagree, you use bully-tactics. In every labour relations situation you have disagreements of this nature. However, concerning transformation we do not disagree with government.



Caroline Brown (middle), CEPPWAWU shopsteward at Warner Lambert.

Mnguni: The current dispute is not about individuals, more specifically the Minister of Public Service. It is an expression of the very same relations that exist between the employer and the employee. We cannot reduce this dispute into a Fraser-Moleketi versus civil servants. She is a senior member within the alliance and is welcome here. Fraser is our comrade and leader and we respect her.

Mlatsba: Government's tone in handling this dispute shows that they are pressurising the public sector unions, especially NEHAWU. They have got a problem with NEHAWU because it is the biggest public sector union and has criticised government policies that undermine the power and the rights of the workers.

If one unpacks the minister's utterances, it means: 'Should you, NEHAWU, continue with industrial action we will cut you down. Thus we can retrench without admitting that we are. We can pretend to be disciplining you for your actions.' This congress should say to government 'enough is enough. We will

not allow you to retrench workers because you are setting a precedent for the private sector to do likewise'.

On the participation and representation of women...

Brown: It can be improved and we are trying. We women who are here must mobilise more women, especially in our workplaces. I push hard in my company to get women to be active. I am sure that if we bring more ordinary workers to the congress more women will see this and decide to be active.

Mlatsba: The figures show that there are more men than women at the congress and that will influence the kind of contribution that women make. The participation of women is improving and so is the delegation.

Harris: It is important for us as women to increase our participation in all the structures of the organisation. When we have our congress next year, we will see a definite improvement on the 30% women present here. ★