

John Gomomo:

*full-time NUMSA shop-steward,
COSATU vice-president,
ANC and SACP leader*

Gomomo first became involved in trade unionism in 1977, through the United Automobile Workers (UAW) at Volkswagen, Uitenhage. The UAW became part of the National Automobile and Allied Workers Union (NAAWU) in 1980, and Gomomo has been a full-time shop steward since 1984. He was vice-president of NAAWU when it became part of NUMSA in 1987, and was elected COSATU second vice-president in 1989. After the February unbannings, Gomomo became a member of the ANC Internal Leadership Core of the Eastern Cape, and of the SACP's Internal Leadership Group.

Unions and community in the Eastern Cape

With other members of FOSATU in the early 1980s, I helped to build civic structures in Uitenhage, although I did not occupy any leadership position. There was a misunderstanding at the time about the role of the civics and the trade unions. If one was seen playing a leading role in the trade union as well as the civic, then you were accused of acting in the interests of the union against the community organisations. But things became clearer later on, when there was state repression during 1986, and many community leaders were on the run. The trade unions discussed and debated the situation in their structures. They decided to take the leading role in the community, and this was at great cost to the unions, because they

had to neglect their union work.

The differences between the MDM and the unions during the recent strike wave in PE (when community activists intervened without going through union structures) were exploited by the employers, who know how to create divisions. But immediately after this happened, we initiated debates within the community organisations to resolve these differences.

In May, at a workshop at the ANC offices, questions were raised with the leadership of the ANC Eastern Cape region. Govan Mbeki made it clear that no political organisation should try and take over the duties and responsibilities of the labour movement. The community should rather wait to be approached. Even then, he said that they should not take the lead, because the community groups do have limitations. That has increased the understanding in the community of the autonomy of the unions.

Local level work

Being in the ANC leadership does not demand much of my time. Trade union work comes first, and I use my influence there to encourage workers to join the ANC. The ANC has projected people who have the confidence of the community. But it still needs to be debated what positions should be held by whom. It would be a political mistake to allow the labour movement to back off, and let people from the underground and exile take the lead. We know the

people, because we have been staying and working with them. So we will fumble first before we arrive at a good arrangement.

I prefer to work at a regional and local level. That way I can maintain contact with the grass-roots. But there are advantages to having national contacts, because information at that level can be fed back to the local level.

Party membership

I joined the party to show to the public that it is the vanguard of the working class struggle. The involvement of the worker leadership shows the dramatic changes in approach of the party, compared with the past. The union leaders will make the public aware that the word 'communism' is not a tiger that is going to bite them.

The unions have influenced the party over a number of years. The party has learnt a lot about Stalinism, and is now fully democratising its operations. Everyone will be accepted into the party, and will be subject to the discipline of the local branch. We needn't be bureaucratic if someone is found to neglect his or her duties. They will be allowed to appeal to the regional structure if disciplined, and if not satisfied he or she can go right up to the central executive committee of the party.

Debates in NUMSA

For a long time NUMSA has been putting forward socialist ideas. This, and our involvement in politics when the party was still banned, has partly led to two NUMSA leaders emerging as party leaders. The debate in NUMSA over the party and WOSA (as reflected in the latest *NUMSA Bulletin*) is new. I am not opposed to such a debate, but feel that it is better placed in journals like the *Labour Bulletin* than in the unions' publications. Because it is only the highly developed leadership that is involved in that debate. It is a bit removed from the ground, and inaccurately reflects the real position in NUMSA (that there is strong support for the party, but very little support for WOSA).

Education and training

A lot of work needs to be done to explain the content of our policies to the people. People who support the ANC shout slogans and rhetoric, but have yet to understand the content of the Freedom Charter. The party will encourage people to read the literature of the movement, and debate it. Even those with a low



level of education must be able to read the literature written in simple language.

White managers surprised

I thought that the shop stewards where I work would be surprised to hear that I was a leader of the SACP. But when they read the press speculation before the rally, they told me that the party could not miss me, as it needs disciplined people.

But there was great surprise from the enemy and business. Some managers hardly greet me now. At a workshop of shop stewards and managers shortly after the rally, white fears were raised about a post-apartheid South Africa. I explained that the policy of the ANC adopted in 1955 spells out that all those who live in the country will be equal before the law. But all along the Nationalist Party indoctrinated the white community into believing that the ANC and SACP are terrorists.

Now that circumstances have forced the government to talk to ANC, their white constituency is running away, with fears of the ANC and SACP. So I told them that 'you are still thinking of protecting your property and wealth. You have not considered the policies of a non-racial, united and democratic South Africa'. After that they invited me to address 250 managers at Volkswagen on the future of the country. ☆