



NACTU 's 3rd congress

*what prospects
for unity?*

DEVAN PILLAY looks at the 258 000-strong NACTU, the second largest trade union federation in South Africa, after its third biennial congress, and asks: Has the Africanist-oriented federation overcome its internal divisions, and can it forge unity with COSATU? How different in fact are the principles and practices of NACTU from that of COSATU?

The National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU), after a period of internal disarray which saw its membership plummet to below 150 000, claimed at its third biennial congress in September to have overcome its divisions, and grown in strength. The federation now claims to have at least 258 000 paid-up members, 43 000 of which come from new affiliates.

Ever since its formation out of a merger between the Council of Unions of South Africa (CUSA) and the Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (AZACTU) in 1986, NACTU has been overshadowed by the more than one million strong COSATU.

After its 1988 congress, when an Africanist-oriented leadership was elected, NACTU was seen by many as a PAC-aligned federation with deep internal divisions, and an

unwillingness to seriously seek worker unity.

NACTU, however, rejects this picture painted of it, and claims to have consolidated its organisation, and grown in strength.

NACTU claims increased numbers

The table shows NACTU's numerical strength at the September congress, based on the affiliation fees each affiliate has paid to the federation.

These figures do not reflect the "real" paid-up membership, says NACTU, which is in the region of 320 000. For example, SACWU claims a paid-up membership closer to 60 000, but for technical reasons only paid affiliation fees for 40 000 at the time of the congress.

This also applies to a number of other affiliates, says NACTU general-secretary Cunningham Ngcukana (see figures in brackets in the table). In addition, the figures do not include the 20 000 signed-up members of NACTU's new Teachers Union. Ngcukana claims that its March 1990 signed-up membership was 588 000.

Based on these figures, NACTU is strongest in the chemicals sector (COSATU's CWIU has a membership of 35 000), the construction industry (COSATU's CAWU has a membership of 21 000), the metal industry, the furniture trade and the food industry. Unions which have claimed significant growth since the last congress are HOTELICA (from 1 800 to 8 000),

MWASA (from 5 000 to 10 000), NUF (from 350 to 10 000), SACWU (from 32 000 to 40 000), SEAWUSA (from 5 500 to 20 000 and TAWU (from 5 000 to 15 000).

These figures indicate a significant improvement over the past ten months. Last January NACTU's former general-secretary, Piroshaw Camay, said that NACTU's membership had fallen to below 150 000. This, he said, was due to the fact that "NACTU unions are not servicing members effectively, not recruiting new members, and members are voting with their feet... there is growing evidence that COSATU unions are winning over NACTU membership, especially in the food and metal sectors..the union leadership generally has not sufficiently moved to recruit new membership, build structures and

provide worker education in the past 18 months" (*Weekly Mail* 26/1/90).



But is this view still valid? According to Ngcukana, NACTU's membership has increased because some affiliates have improved their methods of organising. HOTELICA, for example, went on a recruiting drive after implementing the NACTU principle, adopted in 1988, that "an organiser is someone who builds membership, and not a cheque collector", says Ngcukana. If an organiser cannot recruit properly, then he or she has to be replaced. This approach is still being discussed with affiliates, says Ngcukana, as each have their own employment practices.

From its 1988 congress NACTU has insisted on strict measures to ensure that affil-

NACTU PAID-UP MEMBERSHIP, September 1990

Banking, Insurance, Finance, Assur (BIFAWU)	1 000	(3 000)
Black Trade Union of Transnet (BLATU)	31 750	(45 000)
Black University Workers Assoc (BUWA)	486	
Brushes & Cleaners WU (BCWU)	2 000	(5 000)
Building, Construction and Allied WU (BCAWU)	+35 000	
Federated Mining Union (FMU)	7 000	
Food Beverage WU (FBWU)	18 000	
Hotel, Liquor & Catering (HOTELICA)	8 000	(14 000)
Media Workers Association of SA (MWASA)	+10 000	
Metal Workers Union of SA (MEWUSA)	12 250	(30 000)
Natal Liquor & Catering (NLCTU)	6 732	
National Union of Farmworkers (NUF)	10 000	
National Union of Furniture Workers (NUFW)	24 000	
National Union of Public Service W (NUPSW)	750	(5 000)
Nat Union of Wine, Spirits & Allied (NUWSAW)	6 000	(11 000)
SA Black Municipal & Allied WU (SABMAWU)	3 000	(6 000)
South African Chemical Workers Union (SACWU)	40 000	(60 000)
SA Laundry, Drycleaning & Dyeing (SALDCD)	1 900	(3 320)
Steel, Engineering & Allied WU (SEAWUSA)	20 000	
Transport & Allied WU (TAWU)	15 000	
Transport & Omnibus WU (TOWU)	1 200	
United African Motor & Allied WU (UAMAWU)	2 000	
VUKANI Guards and Allied WU	2 000	
TOTAL	258 068	



ates do not inflate their membership figures for congress. According to Ngcukana, the federation insists on audited financial statements from affiliates, and if necessary will check their books.

NACTU has in the past experienced difficulty in ascertaining its true membership figures. At the 1988 congress, the total membership registered was 150 000, but NACTU felt that its true paid-up membership was nearer 300 000 (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 13 No 7). Ngcukana now says that the membership then was only between 200 000 and 250 000.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of increased activity of some NACTU affiliates over the past year. SACWU has always been very active, and this year won major wage demands at AECI, Plascon and Sasol. According to Ngcukana, it has made significant gains in the Transkei and Ciskei.

MEWUSA worked closely with COSATU's NUMSA in this year's metal industry bargaining, and the two unions came close to embarking on joint strike action. NUSAW has recently come out with a successful first-ever national strike in the wines and spirits industry (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 15 No 2).

Since August, around 1 500 members of the NUF have been on a wage strike at the Zebedelia Citrus Farm in the Northern Transvaal. The NACTU congress resolved to organise a nation-wide day of



Members of SACWU - NACTU's strongest union - protest in early 1990 against racism at AECI

Photo: Morice/LabourBulletin

action in support of the workers after consulting with other progressive organisations, including COSATU.

Divisions within NACTU?

After initiating the first Workers Summit in March 1989, NACTU pulled out at the last minute, causing some of its affiliates to rebel and attend as individual unions (see *Labour Bulletin* 14 No 1). In his opening address to the congress, NACTU president James Ndaweni explained that the federation pulled out because it needed time to develop "clear guidelines after full discussion" within its ranks of the serious issue of building working class unity.

NACTU did, however, attend the second Summit in August 1989, and participated in the highly successful anti-LRA stayaway in September of that year.

But the spirit of unity gener-

ated by the anti-LRA action did not last, as NACTU pulled out of the Conference for a Democratic Future (CDF) in December, despite having served on the convening committee (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 6). It was seen to be following the line of the PAC, which had also decided not to attend the CDF.

However, individual affiliates like the Black Allied Mining and Construction Workers Union (BAMCWU) defied the NACTU decision, and followed its black consciousness (BC) ally Azapo and attended the CDF (which brought together a wide range of anti-apartheid forces, including the UDF and COSATU).

This gave the impression that NACTU was deeply divided along ideological and political lines. This view was strengthened when, on the eve of the CDF, NACTU's general secretary, Piroshaw Camay, resigned (see later).

Expulsions at the congress

Press reports before the congress indicated that NACTU was still 'strife-torn'. BAMCWU, which claims a paid-up membership of 20 000, reportedly threatened to stay away from the congress because of allegedly being "victimised financially" by the federation. Voices of dissatisfaction with the federation were also expressed by unionists in MEWUSA and NUPSW (*Weekly Mail* 29/9/90).

At the congress it was decided to effectively expel BAMCWU, which in the end did not turn up. The reason given was the failure to pay subscription fees for a year. They "disaffiliated themselves", says NACTU, and the congress merely endorsed that. They paid their fees with two "bouncing cheques". If they have financial problems, they have "not discussed it with us", says Ngcukana, despite the federation calling upon them to do so.

As far as NACTU is concerned, therefore, BAMCWU cannot make their expulsion a political issue. NACTU denies any financial victimisation, and point to a sum of R91 750 which the federation helped BAMCWU to receive from the British TUC for an asbestos project.

In a press statement, BAMCWU insisted that its expulsion was "politically motivated", as it was based specifically on the union's attendance of the CDF "as recounted by delegates" to the congress. It also charged that



*Cunningham Ngcukana,
NACTU general secretary*

Photo: Anna Zieminski/Afrapix

the decision to expel the union "was not constitutional, procedural and democratic", and undertook to "challenge" the decision. The union wrote to NACTU "demanding its reinstatement".

BAMCWU general secretary M Mokhine told the *Labour Bulletin* that it did not pay its affiliation fees because NACTU was distributing its resources "on a partisan basis", and not according to the needs of the affiliates.

Many other affiliates, he claims, have not paid their fees, as reflected in resolutions at the congress calling on affiliates to pay, yet "only BAMCWU was singled out". Mokhine disputes NACTU's claim that it had assisted BAMCWU in getting money from the TUC, as "BAMCWU raised the money directly without any assistance". The only role NACTU played was to act as a channel for the funds to come into the country, as requested by the TUC.

The decision to expel another BC-oriented union, the Black Domestic Workers Association (BLADWA), was made because NACTU "is not

sure whether it is a union".

Mokhine, however, alleges that the real reason was to "pave the way for another union formed which espoused the political tendency which makes NACTU comfortable".

Mokhine alleges that serious divisions surfaced during the congress, as a number of affiliates "walked out" of proceedings, and many resolutions, including those on expulsions, were passed by "six to seven affiliates". Most others, he claims, abstained from voting, including NUPSW, MEWUSA, BIFAWU, BCAWU and SALDD.

The Textile Workers Union, whose membership is in the region of 4 000, was expelled because of alleged "mismanagement" of the union, where it was found that the members were not being serviced, and the officials were not accountable. The union had an opportunity to appeal against this decision, but, says NACTU, they failed to turn up for the appeal hearing. They instead wrote a letter to the federation confirming their expulsion.

Mergers

MEWUSA and SEAWUSA are meant to merge under NACTU's new policy of one union per sector, although before the congress Zithulele Cindi of MEWUSA charged that NACTU allowed mergers only when an Africanist-oriented union (like SEAWUSA) can be dominant (*Weekly Mail* 28/9/90). This is





denied by Ngcukana.

N A C T U adopted a firm resolution on mergers at the congress, and gave a deadline of six months for fourteen affiliates to be created out of the present 24. Ngcukana expressed confidence that "there is a commitment by all affiliates" to merge. While the deadline might not be strictly met, he was confident that there would at least be a lot of movement by then.

The most divided sectors are the metal industry, with three unions, MEWUSA, SEAWUSA and UAMAWU, the food industry, with FBWU and NUWSAW in operation, and services. Given the political tensions amongst these unions - out of the 24 affiliates, 12 are said to be Africanist-inclined, and 8 are apparently BC-oriented (see *Indicator SA*, Winter 1990) - it would be a major achievement if the unions in these sectors merge.

Is NACTU 'non-aligned'?

Although the congress re-elected the Africanist-oriented executive which ousted BC supporters in 1988, the federation firmly denies that it is controlled by the PAC or any other political party. The congress adopted a resolution on 'non-alignment', resolving to "co-operate with all political organisations within the policies and principles of the federation".

This principle was put into practice at the congress's opening day, when speakers from the ANC, PAC, New

Unity Movement and Azapo were invited to address the delegates. While all the speakers were warmly received, by far the most enthusiastic response was reserved for the PAC's Benny Alexander.

Alexander accepted NACTU's need for independence in its decision-making, and applauded it for inviting different organisations to the congress. However, he urged the federation to openly collaborate with its "natural allies".

"Isolation from the liberations movements is nothing less than a crime of social betrayal of the African working class", he said. Senior PAC representatives told the *Finance Week* (11/10/90) that the PAC has "neither the power nor the inclination to prescribe to workers in NACTU", but confirmed that "the largest section of NACTU members are also PAC members".

NACTU's largest affiliate, the strongly Africanist SACWU, had to be persuaded to withdraw a motion calling for contact to be restricted to the New Unity Movement, Azapo and the PAC. However, NACTU has adopted political stances which are little different to that of the PAC.

For example, its preconditions for negotiations with the South African government include the "redistribution of resources, particularly the land", a key PAC demand. Its principle of 'African working class leadership', which replaced the BC 'black working class leadership' at the 1988 congress, is based firmly on



Piroshaw Camay: resigned because of divisions in NACTU

Photo: Anna Zieminski/Afrapix

Africanist thinking (see *Labour Bulletin Vol 13 No 7*). Mndaweni and Ngcukana both admit to being PAC members, although they insist that they are careful not to allow their political affiliation to interfere with their unionism (see *New Nation* 12/10/90).

Last December division came to a head when Camay resigned, charging that the federation was being run by a political "caucus" which imposed its decisions on NACTU (*Weekly Mail* 26/1/90). Ngcukana does not think that there is anything unusual about an organisation having caucuses to discuss issues.

It is "part of the democratic process", he says, as long as the structures of the organisation openly debates and discusses the issues before decisions are taken. The existence of a caucus, he insists, does not imply that NACTU is not non-aligned.

Camay's resignation came after the resignation of officials, including two from SACWU, during 1989, and was followed by the resignations of five others during

1990. Early this year there were reports of severe in-fighting in the Natal region of MWASA, with expelled BC officials refusing to vacate their positions. The BC *Azanian Labour Journal* (Vol 3 No 1) is highly critical of the Africanist leadership, claiming that it has lost its most talented officials, and was now in a state of "inefficiency". It also points to victimisation of BC supporters in the federation.

There is, however, some substance to NACTU's claim to being non-aligned politically. In contrast to COSATU, the federation does have contact with a wider range of political forces. Its relationship with the ANC and SACP seems fairly healthy. ANC general secretary Alfred Nzo, in his address to the congress, praised NACTU for the "valuable contribution" it has made in organising the working class, and urged NACTU to continue to pursue unity with COSATU.

When the SACP's Joe Slovo spoke to NACTU leaders earlier this year, he was well received. Ngcukana confirmed that NACTU has maintained contact with the SACP, and has asked Slovo to present his paper 'Has Socialism Failed' to a NACTU seminar. NACTU would also like to convene a workshop with the ANC, PAC and Azapo to discuss their respective economic policies, in order to "be clear what the thinking is around us", said Ngcukana.

How far apart is NACTU from COSATU?

In addition to the principles of 'African working class leadership' and 'non-affiliation to political organisations' mentioned earlier, the congress re-committed NACTU to its principles of 'worker control', and 'financial accountability within unions'. It amended its principle of 'independent action of unions within the federation' to insist that affiliates are "bound by democratic decisions of the federation", and that any deviation from that would mean "disciplinary action" for the affiliate. This brings the federation closer to COSATU's conception of a tight federation. At face value, many of NACTU's policies and stated practices do not differ markedly from COSATU's.

Africanism and non-racialism

NACTU claims that it has been non-racial from its inception. The philosophy of Africanism, and building African working class leadership, does not refer to race, insists Ngcukana, but to the continent of Africa, and the "material conditions of the people". Thus all those who identify with the continent of Africa, and not with the interests of settler-colonialism, are regarded as Africans, no matter what their skin-colour.

Worker control

During the time of CUSA, officials tended to dominate the

affiliates and the federation. NACTU seems to have adopted a policy which brings them very close to COSATU's conception of worker leadership.



When NACTU was formed, a principal of two-thirds workers delegates in all structures of the federation was adopted, and entrenched at the 1988 congress. This policy, says Ngcukana, has been applied strictly. An official has no vote if he or she arrives at a meeting of the federation without workers as part of the union's delegation. If the trade union is for the workers, then the workers should come and speak for themselves, or officials should speak on their behalf in their presence.

The main effect of this policy has been to assist workers in learning about debates, and to participate effectively in decision-making. "They ensure that decisions which are made are worker-controlled decisions," says Ngcukana.

But do all NACTU affiliates really abide by the federation's policies of worker control? The congress resolution points to problems the federation has in getting the affiliates to practice internal democracy, and for leaders to be accountable to the membership. It remains to be seen whether the federation can impose its will on the affiliates.

Fighting sexism

Like COSATU, NACTU has adopted a policy of anti-sexism, and believes that women should be integrated into all



the structures of the federation. At the 1988 congress Patricia de Lille was elected vice-president, the only woman on the executive. This time she decided not to stand for re-election, because of her duties in the Western Cape PAC. No other woman came forward for election, hence the all-male leadership of the federation. However, at least three affiliates have women general-secretaries (NUWSAW, SALDD and BCWU), and there are a number of women in the executives of various affiliates, according to Ngcukana. NACTU resolved to run a workshop programme to discuss the position of women, and to strengthen the Women's Unit.

Ngcukana concedes that, as with COSATU, there is a problem of male chauvinism amongst the membership, and a need to educate men. This is the result of "a whole tradition and culture behind us", and "we need a transformation of cultural values in the whole of society. We are making whatever contribution we can in the context of our time and structures," says Ngcukana.

International affiliations

Another issue which used to divide the workers' movement was its international affiliations. CUSA was viewed with suspicion by the rest of the democratic trade union movement because of its close links with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), whereas SACTU was a member of the

Moscow-aligned World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU).

At its founding congress NACTU, like COSATU, decided not to affiliate to either international federation, for the sake of preserving internal unity, although they have maintained a close relationship with the ICFTU (it is only affiliated to the Organisation of African Trade Union Unity (OATUU)). Recently NACTU established contact with the WFTU, and will be attending its congress in Moscow in November. This is in line with their policy of establishing "fraternal bonds with everybody".

Like COSATU, NACTU has expressed an awareness of the pitfalls of financial dependency. It resolved to call on affiliates to become self-reliant, and "reduce dependency on international funding".

"Unity in action"

NACTU has committed itself to the principle of One Federation One Country. Ngcukana, however, is not optimistic about the possibilities of unity in the near future. Instead, he feels that unity should be slowly forged through creating appropriate forums to minimise conflict, and facilitate united action on the ground.

Minimising conflict

While NACTU seems intent on eliminating conflict amongst its own affiliates operating in the same sectors, it still has to contend with clashes between its affiliates

and COSATU affiliates. Ngcukana does not see competition as "necessarily unavoidable", and argues for "mechanisms" to be built to avoid serious clashes. He believes that, while the present situation of a divided labour movement pertains, minority unions should be recognised, and there should not be an "arrogance of numbers".

He concedes that if workers are divided at the workplace, management can manipulate that to their advantage. In principle he believes in majoritarianism as the "essence of democracy", but the current situation of two federations existing demands "interim measures".

Building unity

Ngcukana, in a recent interview with *New Nation* (12/10/90), spoke of the "lost opportunity" during the 1985 unity talks, which led to the formation of COSATU without CUSA/AZACTU. This, he felt, was "due to a lack of political maturity, vision and tolerance". One of the chief obstacles to unity, says Ngcukana, is the political alignment of COSATU, particularly its adoption of the Freedom Charter. Hence they point to the necessity to first forge 'unity in action', in order to "develop trust and confidence" between COSATU and NACTU.

Ngcukana believes that in a transitional society, one "cannot run away from the impact of politics". Where there is no political democracy, there are "various theories and ideologi-



cal currents which come into play," says Ngcukana, and these have a direct impact on the trade union movement. This is unavoidable, and the best that can be hoped for is worker unity through action and co-operation.

Ngcukana feels that there is a need to incorporate the unaffiliated unions into the two federations, as it is easier to pursue unity with two entities. He is confident that problems can be overcome "once we all know what unites workers".

The first instance of unity in action was the second Workers Summit in August 1989, which led to the highly successful joint stayaway against the LRAA (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 4). COSATU and NACTU have also co-operated closely in negotiations with SACCOLA on the LRA, which led to the historic CNS agreement in May (see *Labour Bulletin* Vol 15 No 2). NACTU has resolved to participate with COSATU in a restructured National Manpower Commission, and to continue to struggle for the inclusion of public sector, farm and domestic workers under the LRA.

NACTU proposes a Third Workers Summit to facilitate the process towards unity. It is hopeful that a date will be set soon with COSATU and the independent unions.

Another example of unity in action occurred during the Nampak strike (see *Labour Action*), when NACTU affiliates SACWU and MWASA pledged their solidarity with COSATU's PPWAWU. In ad-

dition, NACTU organised plants in Wadeville held joint demonstrations and refused to handle Nampak products.

Workers Charter Campaign

One of the objectives of COSATU's workers charter campaign is to unite the workers movement around a set of common demands. Ngcukana confirms that NACTU has received a request from COSATU to be part of the campaign, but points to its own programme of formulating a "workers manifesto". This process will not entail "intellectuals imposing ideas on the working class", but a programme of education which will allow workers themselves to formulate their own manifesto. They have already run workshops and seminars. While Ngcukana would not comment on the nature of COSATU's campaign, he stressed that NACTU's campaign was not a "top-down" process. He felt that the Third Workers Summit could discuss a joint campaign between NACTU and COSATU.

The prospects for unity

While there are clearly major obstacles to forging unity between NACTU and COSATU, these are not insurmountable. NACTU regards itself as a "parliament of the working class", in that it believes in allowing all political views of the liberation movement to be expressed. COSATU, on the other hand, has strengthened

its alignment with the ANC and SACP, and some of its most prominent leaders are SACP leaders. Is it desirable for COSATU to adopt a more 'non-aligned' position, in the interests of broader working class unity? Is this the main issue dividing the union movement? Or is this issue merely a red herring, to obscure what some believe is a desire of the PAC to maintain an independent base within the union movement?

Given that there is more that unites the working class than divides it, it is the responsibility of the trade union movement to actively seek unity. Difficult as it may be, political and ideological differences ought not to keep the workers movement divided, especially since both NACTU and COSATU subscribe to the principle of trade union independence.

NACTU is clearly a substantial organisation, and many of its affiliates have won important battles for the working class. NACTU may be influenced by PAC thinking, and the allegations of political partisanship within its ranks cannot be dismissed. However, NACTU has shown a degree of political openness by, for example, inviting a range of political groups to address its congress. The federation insists on its commitment to seeking worker unity and to "bridge divisions" within the liberation movement. COSATU needs to respond to this challenge. ☆