

# NACTU: pulling no punches

NACTU held a special consultative conference on 14-15 March to set guidelines for organisational restructuring. Recommendations on these questions, on CODESA, and on vital economic issues will go to the next meeting of the NACTU CC at the end of March. General secretary CUNNINGHAM NGCUKANA spoke to SNUKI ZIKALALA.

**Labour Bulletin:** *NACTU has just had its consultative conference, What issues did the conference deal with?*

**Ngcukana:** We discussed critical policy issues. The first was CODESA. There is a view that CODESA is very problematic. We made analyses of what we would achieve as a federation. We made an analysis of CODESA: the forces that are at play, the processes that some forces see it should move through. We will make a decision from that analyses at the Central Committee meeting at the end of this month.

On the question of the National Economic Forum: we are not quite happy with its progress. The employers have different approaches. So we have not been able to make progress. We all agree that we need an economic forum that will address the question of economic restructuring and the urgent economic needs. But whether it will be a negotiating forum or an advisory body is another matter.

We as trade unions need to work out quite clearly the form and nature of the forum. We have been approaching the question in a very ad hoc way and have not looked at a number of issues and consequences.

**Bulletin:** *What should the National*

*Economic Forum deal with?*

**Ngcukana:** In my view the National Economic Forum should deal with specific economic issues such as taxation, job creation, job training, investment code and investment policy on trade and tariffs.

I don't see the economic forum dealing with ideological issues. If ask me what kind of a political economy I would want, I will argue for a socialist economy. SACCOB will argue for a free market economy and others will talk of a mixed economy and there will be no progress. The participation of political parties would create ideological debates on issues on which we want to reach agreement and address solutions.

**Bulletin:** *What should be the relationship of the National Economic Forum to CODESA?*

**Ngcukana:** This is the question that is being debated at present. I don't see the National Economic Forum related to CODESA for two reasons. Firstly, CODESA is a political process. A political process might succeed or it might fail. We don't believe that economic issues should be tied to a political process at the moment. If CODESA were the government authority of the day, then that makes a big difference. But if CODESA is a political

negotiating forum of all political shades there is a problem.

**Labour Bulletin:** *COSATU has demanded that the interim government must be installed by June, and if the government does not accede to that there will be mass action. What is your comment on that?*

**Ngcukana:** COSATU has reached an agreement with its alliance partners on a transitional process to arrive at the constituent assembly. They have defined the route and the path. NACTU is still in the process of defining that, and therefore we can't commit ourselves to that process or to the interim government. But we will definitely go along with the call for the constituent assembly by and we agree with COSATU's view that a constituent assembly should be elected. But then, we will have to iron out the differences.

**Bulletin:** *How did your consultative conference address the question of trade union unity?*

**Ngcukana:** The consultative conference discussed the resolution on trade union unity of the last summit. The conference endorsed the leadership position - agreed to by COSATU and NACTU on 2 March - that a co-ordinating committee of office bearers of COSATU and NACTU must be set up to co-ordinate industrial sectors of the unions, which will identify and try to resolve obstacles to unity. There should also be co-ordination of COSATU and NACTU at regional and local levels to ensure that the process of unity sinks in at the grassroots.

The conference also looked into the question of drawing other unions, such as

FEDSAL and independent unions, into the process. Trade union unity cannot be a process only between COSATU and NACTU. It must involve the entire trade union movement in our country.

The question of affiliations and alliances should be addressed by the co-ordinating committees and that should be taken to the next worker summit in May.

Also, the question was addressed of nationalist ideologies that impair the imperative of trade union unity. That was

looked upon as a reality that will exist as long as we are still fighting for national liberation.

**Bulletin:** *Do you think the ideological differences you have had with COSATU will emerge again?*

**Ngcukana:** Yes, we have not fooled ourselves that ideological differences are going to whither away. From our own ranks we have those who have ideological problems with the COSATU-SACP

alliance, and also have their own ideological positions. We believe that we should be able to address workers unity and should find ways and means of overcoming this problem.

**Bulletin:** *What about the question of mergers of unions within NACTU?*

**Ngcukana:** The question of mergers is a vital point for us. We are going to the next conference in October and one thing we are clear about is that it should be complete by then. We have set out time limits. We still stand by our position that a union which refuses to merge is going to be expelled.

**Bulletin:** *It has been reported that you are*

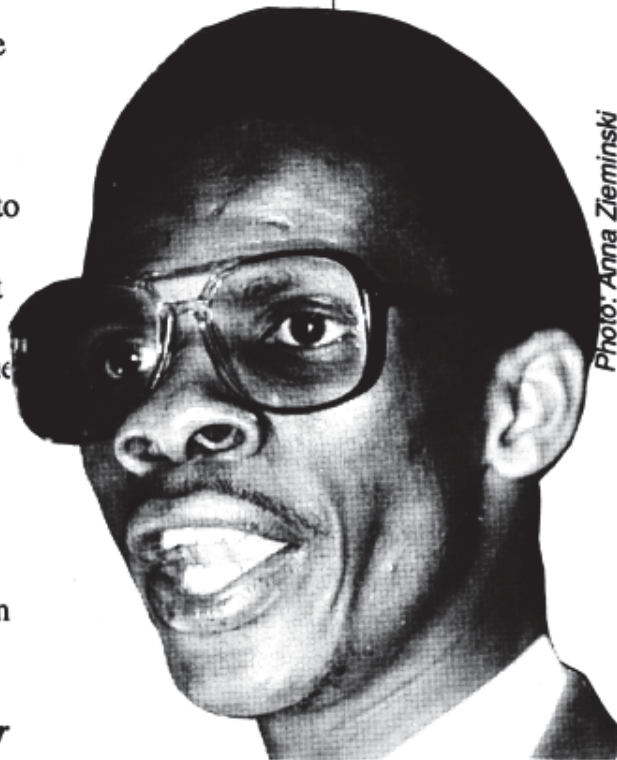


Photo: Anna Ziemiński



**reducing your offices from 21 to 11. Is that part of the rationalisation process?**

**Ngcukana:** Yes, that is part of the rationalisation process and restructuring programme of NACTU in terms of the productivity and effectiveness of the federation as a whole. We are paying particular attention to the problem of our organisers. We had about 40 organisers within the federation for different affiliates, different localities, but they are not very effective.

The second issue was the question of the cost-effectiveness of having many offices rather than a few offices that will co-ordinate work. We came to the conclusion that some of the offices have to be closed and we have to transfer organisers to individual affiliates so that their productivity and effectiveness can be measured.

**Bulletin:** *Which sectors have you brought together?*

**Ngcukana:** The construction union is reconstructing itself, building proper structures on the ground. We as a federation are working on merging the service sector, metal sector, the public sector and transport. NACTU is also restructuring its head quarters. We are looking for qualified journalists, researchers, economists and administrators.

**Bulletin:** *How has far NACTU gone in tertiary education?*

**Ngcukana:** We have reached an agreement on tertiary education. We are only awaiting funding. The Dutch are to be paying for that course and we are hoping to begin in June. UNISA is preparing some of the staff and courses. Our organisers, administrators and of course the national leadership, will be involved.

**Bulletin:** *With the whole leadership involved in tertiary education, won't that hamper the organisational work of the federation?*

**Ngcukana:** I believe acquisition of skills is more important at this juncture. If you look at the

type of unionists that we have in SA, in particular in the democratic trade union movement: we have activists. Their orientation on collective bargaining at factory level and to some extent at industrial council level is not that impressive. This is because they do not have the necessary skills, such as having analyses of company financial statements, economic notions about the company, the industry and the general economy and the impact at micro-macro level of the state of the economy.

Also, if you look at our approach now, we are talking about a macro economic forum. There, we will only be able to deal with the principles. The details will have to be dealt with at industrial level and we will have to have trained and skilled people at that level to handle that. It is no use having only a few people who are able to handle issues at the top when the people who will be dealing with the substance and detail do not have necessary education. The bosses will be bringing educated economists and our people will be bamboozled.

So it is important to run this programme at this time. We accept that we have started very late, but events are moving at a very fast pace. So we find that we are quite behind. We are very concerned about workers understanding macro economic issues.

The type of trade union cadres that we have has to come under scrutiny. They must have a working class ideological perspective and they must be skilled. That is why we are upgrading our staff.

**Bulletin:** *Are NACTU and its affiliates rethinking their position on issues like centralised bargaining forums?*

**Ngcukana:** Yes, we are thinking of new strategies. We have recommended to the affiliates that one affiliate must have a bargaining conference that will look at bargaining issues on a regular basis and assess progress made in bargaining at national level. We are also setting up an economic committee that will look at specific economic issues. We are struggling for a centralised bargaining



forums and we are telling affiliates that it is very important that we have that at industry level.

**Bulletin:** *Has NACTU's Federated Mining Union signed an*

*agreement on productivity, and what is your opinion on productivity agreements?*

**Ngcukana:** I am very sceptical about productivity agreements.

You can't quantify productivity in economic terms and variables, and sign a productivity agreement linking it to bonuses and wage increments, while the people who are supposed to monitor it all, do not have skills for that. Productivity and company income etc is very difficult to comprehend if you do not have the necessary skills or knowledge, and in the end the company will be bamboozling shop stewards.

You must have skilled shop stewards who understand company financial accounts, the whole question of cash flows, company expenditure etc. For instance, a company knows its targets and has its own board room plans which are not known to shop stewards, and therefore you cannot link the standard of living of workers to the plots and plans of big bosses.

It will also create organisational problems and friction amongst workers. You will have workers saying that this one is not working and yet he/she wants a share. And if a worker is dismissed for not being productive or that his/her productivity is very low, this will create tensions in the factory.

**Bulletin:** *What is the vision of NACTU on questions like democracy and mandates?*

**Ngcukana:** At the beginning of the year, we held an organisers seminar attended by 60 regional organisers of NACTU as well as educators of the affiliates. We made an



*Consultative conference discussion: pulling no punches*

*Photo: Shariff/Labour Bulletin*

assessment of worker control and democracy in the federation.

We did not pull any punches. We looked at the question of affiliates with weak structures at local and

regional level. Many affiliates had twelve different structures. We then called for the reorganisation of structures and the integration of educational and organisational activities.

We also looked at the question of false democracy. Despite having structures, you find that officials are the ones who are playing a leading role. Because of lack of education of workers on the ground, workers are passive. That is why we looked at the question of integration of educational and organisational activities. An uninformed shop floor leader is unable to make an independent decision. Then the decision making is done only by officials.

So we now have a national education forum which combines educators of affiliates and NACTU. They meet twice a month, looking at educational activities and plan for the future.

**Bulletin:** *What about broader working class unity?*

**Ngcukana:** We have discussed with COSATU the possibility of bringing ANC, PAC and AZAPO together once more, in that the divisions these political organisations have on strategic and political questions impacts on the working relationship of the trade union movements. This divides the working class itself. These questions do impact on the working relationship between COSATU and NACTU and within the working class. Therefore, it is imperative that the three organisations come together and define the processes. ☆