

# NACTU: restricting to meet the future



NACTU is merging affiliates to form single industrial unions. It is actively pursuing unity with COSATU. It has arranged a university training programme to equip its leadership for their role in a new South Africa. General Secretary CUNNINGHAM NGCUKANA, talks to SNUKI ZIKALALA.

**Labour Bulletin:** *Nactu has been seen as moving closer to unity in action with COSATU. Is this so?*

**Ngcukana:** The question of unity between NACTU and COSATU is not a simple event. There are problems and stumbling blocks which have to be overcome. Politics is one of the hurdles to be crossed. However, I don't think just because we differ in politics there is no room for unity in action. It also depends entirely on the leadership. If it has a vision and imagination, a number of problems can be solved.

NACTU, as a working class organisation, is not officially aligned to any political organisation as is COSATU, which is aligned to the ANC and the SACP. What we have done as a trade union federation, is we

have supported a political platform that is in the interests of the working class. We believe this is a correct position, since it allows us to retain our own independence. In this position we are able to criticise any political programme which we believe might affect the interests of the working class.

We believe a trade union federation can be a parliament of the working people coming from various ideological backgrounds. It is only in such a federation that we can adopt a political programme which will defend our interests. This will also safeguard our independence, since we will not be aligned to any political organisation.

**Labour Bulletin:** *NACTU has committees which will facilitate the*

*merger of its affiliates into single industrial unions. What are these sectors and who is their membership?*

**Ngcukana:** The mergers are part and parcel of the re-organisation of NACTU. This is one of the pillars of restructuring and rationalisation in the federation.

Our target for mergers is 31 March. We are bringing together small unions which are in transport, metal, catering, food and public services. In each of these sectors there is more than one union and this affects our organisational work. Belonging to different unions in one industry makes it impossible for us to co-ordinate our activities and to speak with one voice.

We have taken a very strong decision on the question of mergers. If a union



does not want to merge, it will be expelled from NACTU. This is not an easy task to undertake. There are questions of personality and of positions being defended. This is a process of rationalisation and restructuring of our federation.

NACTU is made up of affiliates and any decision taken will be in the interests of those who have affiliated. The merger is long overdue. That is why we have taken such a strong measure that will bring our unions under a single body in each sector.

At the moment we are not in a position to give a proper figure of our membership. Questionnaires have been sent to all our unions. This will give us a clear perspective on their memberships and areas of organisation.

**Labour Bulletin:** *How is NACTU approaching the question of education?*

**Ngcukana:** NACTU has its own Education Department which is staffed by seven educators. We run our own basic education programmes. In addition to that, affiliates run their own programmes.

Presently, in terms of developmental education, we have assessed the future needs of the trade union movement according to skills. We weighed the current skills in the federation and we believe we will not be able to meet the future demands of the working class. We need an intensive education programme for our



*NACTU action - the federation looks ahead*

*Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin*

leadership.

In this regard, we have agreed with UNISA on a tertiary programme. It is a two year programme which will train our leadership in various skills.

We need a leadership that is grounded in economics, which will help us in micro and macro-economic issues. The South African trade union movement is lacking in those fields. We are working out a programme that will deal with financial accounting and administration, principles of negotiation, commercial and labour law, trade union management, occupational health and safety, and comparative labour relations systems. It is very important that we have a theoretically

well grounded leadership with skills that are oriented towards the needs of the people.

As a short and long term project, this will prevent the trade union movement from being used by outside persons for their own agendas. It is a fact that we won't be able to fund ourselves. That is why we are currently negotiating with some donors for funding. The whole project will cost about R2 million. UNISA will train about 60-100 cadres per year. We have selected people who have experience in trade union work and knowledge on the proposed subjects.

UNISA is the most suitable institution. We have



taken into consideration its experience in conducting distance education.

We are not prepared to remove our leadership from its own constituencies. This will create a vacuum. Part-time classes which will combine theoretical and practical knowledge are regarded as the best for our leadership.

**Labour Bulletin:** *How does NACTU see its participation in the patriotic front?*

**Ngcukana:** We have always supported a broad front of democratic forces. We are also in support of a broad political platform of organisations. This enables democratic forces to reach a consensus on key political questions. We see the patriotic front in that vein.

However, we don't see the patriotic front as having all the solutions for the working people. It is a short term process for specific objectives. The working class still has to strive for long term objectives.

What the patriotic front may achieve is an approach which has a united voice on key and strategic issues. This will help in eliminating friction within the democratic forces on key political questions.

It is unfortunate that one of the convenors, AZAPO, was expelled before the conference started. Such a situation should have been avoided by both the ANC and the PAC. I don't condone what AZAPO

did, but I believe that through intensive discussions some of the problems could have been avoided. I am afraid to say, if the patriotic front does not work out, we will have more divisions within the black community.

We will have different organisations pulling their own ways and this might fuel more violence.

We are attending the patriotic front conference as an independent organisation. And our main task is to put a workers' view on key important issues affecting our unity in action.

**Labour Bulletin:** *How is NACTU organising for the VAT campaign?*

**Ngcukana:** We had a VAT campaign conference in May. A decision was taken that we should pull together with other organisations in opposing the VAT system.

VAT will affect the standard of living of the working people in terms of foodstuffs, medicines and medical supplies. Big business will be exempted in terms of dividends.

We were surprised to learn that VAT was part of the IMF package given to the South African regime. As you know, the IMF is an institution of big business. It has no morals and only acts in the interests of the profiteers. The implementation of structural adjustment throughout the Third-World has brought untold misery to millions of people.

It should be made clear

that NACTU is not opposed to a tax system as long as the tax system is negotiated beforehand. The tax system should not affect the standard of living of workers.

As workers representatives, we are making demands for a tax commission, where workers and finance capital will be represented and will discuss a tax system. We have to look not only on the revenue side but also on the expenditure. Workers have the right to know how their tax money is being used by the state. That is why we are taking up the VAT campaign.

On the upcoming strike, we have organised joint regional meetings with COSATU. A thorough explanation was made to the workers about the implications of VAT. Workers are very angry that the government has taken such a drastic decision about their lives without consulting them. They are the ones who recommended a general strike be called on 4-5 November.

This will be one of the biggest strikes in the history of South Africa. The strike is supported by a broad coalition: medical practitioners, small business, consumer organisations, welfare organisations and some of the more moderate unions.

There is wide general support for the strike. It is better organised than all the strikes that have shaken this government. We are going for a major showdown with the regime. ☆