

Nationalisation, socialism and the Alliance

A number of resolutions adopted by the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa) at its recent congress provoked enormous media interest. **Moses Mayekiso** (general secretary) explains why the union calls, unfashionably, for nationalisation without compensation, and why it wants broader unity on the Left and an end to the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (Cosatu's) alliance with the African National Congress (ANC). This article was published in Volume 17, Number 4, 1993.

Following the Numsa congress in July there was a great deal of speculation and comment in the press as to the crudeness of Numsa's economic policy and its intention to break the alliance and start a new Workers' Party.

This uninformed comment also caused a degree of confusion among rank and file members of the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP).

The NUMSA national office-bearers have therefore in the light of the controversies and national interest sparked by the resolutions at our congress decided to release a more comprehensive communique on key decisions of that congress.

NUMSA is a very strong supporter of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. In keeping with this viewpoint we decided to open our national congress in its entirety so that the media could hear first-hand what was said and why. This commitment to transparency made little impact. The media chose with isolated

exceptions, not to hear the key debates that they were so quick to comment on afterwards.

UNINFORMED MEDIA COMMENT

This is a great pity since our congress was an important expression of democratic practice. It is a tradition in NUMSA that full-time paid officials do not participate in the congress debate. This approach arises from our view that the value of a policy lies in its support, understanding and participation by worker leaders. Carefully managed congresses may please the media but they don't reflect workers' views.

The debates were robust, reflective of an active membership in a democratic union. All manner of issues were discussed and those that were 'hot' ended in votes. The general secretary's report was also debated and amended. This gives an extensive background to many decisions in congress but has received scant attention from the media.

The conference itself was a culmination of six months of preparation. In the process resolutions

were discussed on the factory floor, in local general councils, in regional councils, and finally in the national congress. There were 780 delegates in congress representing 11 regions, and covering the whole of South Africa. In our assessment a significant majority of the delegates would be supporters or members of the ANC and SACP; many of them in fact being local office bearers of these organisations.

The congress discussed a range of resolutions and adopted detailed policy positions on industry restructuring and a reconstruction accord. These documents are every bit as important to South Africa's future as the issues which the media concentrated on. We make the above points to alert our society to the dangers of superficial analysis and reporting. Those reading the media reports or at least most of them, would be badly misinformed about Numsa as an organisation.

Now is the time to increase the kind of knowledge and understanding about different views held by organisations. If we are going to meaningfully interact we need to do



Moses Mayekiso: In support of nationalisation.

so on the basis of knowledge, not ideological distortion. The full text of the resolutions, general secretary's report and minutes of debate are available from Numsa. However, we wish to briefly address certain key areas.

Numsa has endorsed the idea of a reconstruction accord. The accord is seen both as our perspective on the transition and the basis of our support for the ANC in the coming elections. Two qualifications should be mentioned.

Firstly, the construction accord was supported on condition 'that the ANC achieves in the constitutional negotiations a bottom line of a strong and democratic unitary state based on majority rule without any minority veto.'

Secondly, that two important issues need to be part of the reconstruction programme; the need for land redistribution and nationalisation of the leading heights of the economy. The land question is central for redistribution and housing provision, as well as for the development of policies that would protect our natural resources.

WHY NATIONALISE?

Controversy has emerged on the question of nationalisation – particularly our emphasis that it should be without compensation and

should focus on the leading heights of the economy.

These are no doubt newsworthy items, but isolated from other issues this focus is also a distortion. Nonetheless, some fairly basic points need to be made for a better understanding of those decisions.

These demands are not new having been stated in the Freedom Charter, and in previous Cosatu and Numsa resolutions. What was controversial was the insertion of the two words 'without compensation'. Numsa's congress had in fact debated this in 1991 but decided then to remain silent on that key issue. However, this year regions chose to raise the same issue again. After nearly three hours of debate the matter was put to the vote and adopted by the relatively narrow margin of 455 to 312 votes.

The debate on the merits and demerits of nationalisation had largely subsided before this resolution was adopted by Numsa. This is not surprising given the total onslaught mounted by the majority of the media. However, nationalisation has been and will remain a necessary and legitimate instrument of economic policy. We need to remind white South Africa that they were not slow in nationalising to achieve similar objectives that we now say are central to the eradication of apartheid's socio-economic legacy.

NEED FOR AN ACTIVE STATE

What in essence is being addressed is the size, character and function of the public sector.

That this is a very necessary and important debate is now widely conceded. The state must and will play a role in socio-economic reconstruction.

The question of land is complex and emotive in South Africa. There can be no doubt that both urban and rural development require land reform if they are to succeed and be equitable. How can anyone possibly consider a situation where existing white landowners are allowed to profit from the need to use the land for development to meet the needs of the majority?

Racist legislation and forceful confiscation form the basis of existing land ownership patterns. It is immoral that as we now try and address the consequences of racism landowners should enjoy a second round of benefit in the form of a rent emerging from development. People may not agree with the proposal but it is a perfectly legitimate demand from those that have been dispossessed.

The prevailing complacency around development is dangerous. If existing landowners were to become wealthy at the expense of those who have suffered it could create massive political pressures. Land reform is essential and the nationalisation of land could well be the most effective means of achieving this.

The resolution on nationalisation also maintained that this should be done without compensation. This was a hotly debated issue in the congress.

UNITY OF THE LEFT

The need to build political unity on the Left was another important consideration at the congress.

The resolution adopted, recommended that 'Cosatu should now look at strengthening and uniting the working class inside and outside the factories; in urban and rural areas'. It reiterated our 1991 call for a 'conference on socialism' as well

as a 'conference of civil society'.

The dramatic events of the fall of 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern Europe need to be soberly looked at by the Left in the country. To date only the SACP and to a limited extent the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA) and the International Socialists of South Africa (ISSA) have done some reflection on the crisis of existing socialism. Yet this issue has implications for everyone not least Cosatu which is committed to socialism and the ANC with its anti-imperialist traditions.

We need both a sober assessment of this crisis as well as the charting of a programme to take us out of this abyss. Such a process cannot be the monopoly of one organisation or individual, but must be a heterogeneous project of the entire left movement.

Numsa's congress resolved to:

- Look at new forms of organisation that will unify the working-class organisations and parties that will take forward a programme to implement socialism. This could take the form of a Working Class Party.
- Set into motion a concrete programme of action to address the needs of the unemployed and underemployed.
- Instead of simply calling conferences we want a mechanism to be put in place to monitor the decisions implemented after these two conferences. This mechanism must be based regionally and nationally.
- Implement the 1991 resolution on the unity of the Left. The Left (is) defined as those organisations with a programme reflecting the following:
 - commitment to control the means of production by the working class for the benefit of society as a whole
 - democracy
 - internationalism
 - anti-imperialism
 - non-racialism.

Anyone familiar with the South African Left will attest to the fact that it is divided. The divisions are at times ideological otherwise theoretical or on strategic questions. In Numsa we have all these left traditions within our ranks. That diversity has been a resource and has made our organisation a robust weapon in the struggle against capital. We are the living proof that diversity is healthy.

NEW FORMS OF ORGANISATION

It is within this context that we are calling for the left forces to unite. Our resolution stresses the need to look at 'new forms of organisation'. We then say that 'this could take the form of a Working Class Party'. But we are not wedded to any particular form at this stage. Possibilities include a front of left forces or one organisation. Much depends on the agreement reached with various left forces. The 'Working Class Party' is but one form.

The delegates who were mainly supporters of the SACP, felt that the SACP should play a leading role in this process together with left sections of the ANC as well as other left forces like WOSA and many independent socialists and social democrats. The essential objective of unity would be to begin to grapple with the struggle for socialism within the unfolding democratisation process; as well as the developing of socialist positions and programmes on concrete issues such as development policy, industrial efficiency, trade and so on.

This is not a call for movement by the left forces from the ANC, but as looking at the possibilities of strengthening the Left as a class force within the multiclass ANC. The struggle for the soul of the ANC is not in contradiction to the consolidation of the Left as a force.

The resolution must therefore be seen as a challenge to working-class forces in the ANC to reappraise the strategic meaning of the Alliance to seek ways of consolidating what has been achieved through the liberation movement and to relate it to the strategic goal of socialism. Our

position is therefore not backward looking but is forward looking; it is attempting to look at the challenges of the Left in the 1990s not in the 1980s.

NEW THINKING NEEDED

The present situation demands new thinking from the Left. We live in an era in which the post-1917 revolution process of transformation has to be relooked at. The unfolding democratisation process raises the question of how we will move towards socialism. Is socialism a far-away goal that awaits the storming of Pretoria? Or is it a moment in the deepening of the unfolding democratisation process?

We also need to re-examine and review the method and institutions (and their relationship) for socialism. Critically important is how we advance towards socialism. How useful in the present context is the concept of a vanguard? If it is no longer useful what should replace it and simultaneously be an effective organ?

Can a working class-biased party or movement be effective without at the same time falling into the trap of substitutionism, where activists (rather than ordinary workers) are the active element in the organisation? And what should be the role of political parties? Should it be to lead struggles by itself or should it be to focus on building organs of self-empowerment; relegating its role to an ideological and catalysing one, subordinated to this mass empowerment strategy? Should it do both and if so what should be the balance?

Can the notion of democratic centralism persist in the context of emerging plurality? Is it possible to have a cohesive organ within an uncohesive reality?

Numsa certainly does not have immediate answers to all these questions but the workers appeared to be looking for them when they resolved to 'look at new forms of organisation that will unify the working class'.

OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ANC

Numsa's congress also commented on the related issue of Cosatu's relationship with the ANC. It resolved that 'once an Interim Government of National Unity is established and the ANC is part of it, we should not have a formal alliance with the ANC. We should deal with the ANC as part of the government of the day through engagement in forums such as the NEF, NMC etc.'

The experience of communist countries where the trade unions were conveyor belts of the government is clear testimony that we have to rethink the basis of the alliance. We also have a long-standing tradition in Numsa and Cosatu of promoting union independence from government.

In our case, we believe that the formal status of the Alliance must end and that we should relate with the ANC as the government of the day. Ending the Alliance does not necessarily mean we will stop sharing political objectives with the ANC and the SACP. But in the pursuit of those objectives various social and political forces must have enough space and autonomy to pursue their objectives.

Just as leadership cannot be proclaimed but should be earned so a political party/movement of certain class forces should not be formalised, but must be an organic product of history. A formal alliance becomes more problematic when such formalisation acts as a barrier to the actual unity of the trade union movement both within the oppressed and across the race barriers. One of the reasons put by the NACTU-affiliated Metal & Electrical Workers Union (Mewusa) for delaying merger with Numsa is because of our alliance with the ANC and the SACP. There is still the difficult challenge of making inroads within the white working-class.

The question needs to be asked, are these objectives realisable within or outside of the Tripartite Alliance?

Another reason for ending the Alliance is that political and union organisation have different priorities and different forms of representation. Even in a working class-biased movement, imperatives of macro-economic considerations can result in policies which appear in the short term as inimical to workers resulting in a conflict of interests. In such situations, we believe autonomy will make it easier to discharge our natural duty of defending workers.

In the concrete conditions of our country what does ending the Alliance mean for the reconstruction accord? It is our view that ending a formal relationship doesn't mean an end to the relationship between the parties. But the relationship changes in two respects. Firstly, it becomes one between a movement/party and the entire organised working class, as against being a privileged relationship with Cosatu.

Secondly, the relationship becomes contingent; it is less informed by principles and more by concrete problems and issues at hand.

Will this lead to economism and what about the fight for a socialist conscious unionism? In any labour organisation the tendency towards economism and corporatism is always a possibility. But like all else in politics, it is a product of political struggles. In fact within the existing Alliance there is already developing within Cosatu, a tendency towards corporatism. Only a political battle can ensure that the tendency does not subsist. ¹⁸

Moses Mayekiso is a former Numsa general secretary.

Cosatu and the elections

Sakhela Buhlungu

reported on the pre-election interviews that he conducted all over South Africa to assess how Cosatu involved itself in the elections, and what the impact of that involvement had been on Cosatu. This article was published in Volume 18, Number 2, 1994.

BACKGROUND

In September last year Cosatu fired the first shots of the election campaign by announcing the names of 20 unionists to stand for election on an African National Congress (ANC) ticket. Since then the 1.25 million strong federation has thrown its full weight behind the ANC in what many of its members regarded as a liberation election in South Africa. Many South Africans observed the election campaign through the eyes of the mass media and election