

Being there – by those who were

With our intrepid Com dot Com reporter away, we decided to publish personal accounts of union delegates to the recent Cosatu congress...

First time congress goers

September 16 was the most historic, educative and interesting day of my entire life. It was the first time that I formed part of the National Cosatu Congress Delegation — what the president of the federation called ‘the workers’ parliament’.

An impressive moment was when the deputy president entered the congress hall. Automatically the delegates gave him a standing ovation coupled with the slogan: ‘You, who is in charge of the Scorpions, tell us what Zuma did. U enzeni Zuma, a uphendule.’ Many anticipated that the deputy president would react to that, but when he was given a slot to greet the workers, it seemed as if he had heard nothing at all.

The workers’ parliament showed an expertise in discussing and resolving issues in an amicable way that created a healthy atmosphere conducive to debate. The mood seemed highly excitable during the debate on who should be voted into leadership positions, but ultimately everything went back to normal as they obeyed the Cosatu constitution.

I was impressed by the way the leadership and members at large

acknowledged the services of their fellow members who are in leadership positions. It was a memorable congress.

Dolly Dihangwane, Limpopo Province, Bushbuckridge Region

Steers food wins hands down

On arrival at Gallagher Estate on the first day of the congress all the unions flocked together while singing and dancing. The atmosphere was fantastic. Everybody had a long-sleeved red sweater on and you could feel the unity among the workers.

I was lucky to sit an aisle away from the national and international guests. I saw people like Kader Asmal, Manie Dipico, Manto Tshabalala–Msingang, Blade Nzimande, Terror Lekota and others. In the front row were people like Jay Naidoo and Cyril Ramaphosa. Other important guests who came to pay a visit were Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and deputy president Jacob Zuma.

Comrade Terror Lekota read the keynote address on behalf of president Mbeki who was absent on the first day due to affairs in Tanzania. Comrade Willy Madisha delivered his

chairperson’s address amid loud applause from the delegates. I was not impressed with the food and we walked to a Steers to buy burgers.

We broke for the day and went to another hall where Madiba addressed us. This was the highlight for me because I’ve always wanted to meet him. Although I sat far away from the stage, just the fact that we were in the same room was comfort enough. Madiba was very emotional while speaking to the delegates.

Tuesday 16 September: The highlight of the day was when Thabo Mbeki addressed the congress. He spoke about the ANC’s relationship with Cosatu while Cosatu in turn gave its undying support to the ANC for a landslide victory in the 2004 elections.

We again walked to Steers to buy food. My poor bank account!

Wednesday 17 September: The international session was characterised by a perspective of workers’ experiences globally. It gave one a clear understanding of how workers of the world are exploited by the capitalists. The international speakers were similar in their condemnation of the bourgeoisie. The neo-liberals are still arrogant in imposing dictatorial policies on third world countries. Being



at the congress was a good experience. I met a lot of new friends, learnt some new songs and bought some paraphernalia. But to those out there, who think that these congresses are a ball, think again!

Jacqueline Titus, West Coast Region, Western Cape.

Global struggle

I realised the scope, width and breadth of our federation on this day when over 2 000 delegates descended on Gallagher Estate for the 8th Cosatu National Congress.

The opening address by our president, Comrade Willy Madisha captured the historical importance of the congress in terms of the 2004 elections as well as the tensions within the alliance, especially during the anti-privatisation strikes. This address showed his depth as leader of the federation.

Mandela's presence caused an electrifying atmosphere, but left me with a great deal of sadness, realising that all that time — 27 years in jail — had to be wasted. How different our world would have been had it not been so.

Tuesday 16 September: Speeches were made by president Mbeki and his deputy. Political motions were debated. The debates around the alliance were truly boring and disappointing. Most debates about the alliance were pure rhetoric with the exception of Numsa and Sactwu whose inputs contributed to making the motion more practical and workable. In my view, the inputs

from my union, Sadtu and NUM only served to dilute the gist and spirit of their particular motion.

On the same day the World Trade Organisation talks in Cancún, Mexico collapsed. For me this slotted in perfectly with what we talked about and debated at congress, amongst other things, the neo-liberal policies and the power and threat of capital against the working class. This may sound politically naïve, but the collapse of the Cancún talks was also a highlight of my day.

Wednesday 16 September: Inputs were made by the general secretaries of the Organisation of African Trade Unions and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. This showed once again that the struggle of the working class is not an isolated one, but a global one. Political resolutions were debated again with the motion on a revised national election system taking up most of the time. NUM was the sponsor of this progressive motion, capturing what is debated by the people on the street, especially the part about the accountability and deployment of premiers and mayors.

During this debate NUM impressed me. In my humble view it seemed as if some unions were shying away from the real issues and not calling a spade a spade. Was it maybe because government representatives were part of congress as observers and comrades did not want to step on toes — maybe having some political aspirations of their own?

My observation on this third day was that women from other unions are

more empowered, expressing themselves articulately. I cannot say the same for the women in my union. Why? Is it maybe because we are transported from Congress to Congress to meet a gender quota? After being visible you have served your purpose

Thursday 18 September: The day was spent on socio-economic resolutions but it irks me that these crucial resolutions are always dealt with on the last day of congress. In my view, these resolutions cover everything that lies at the heart of members on the ground.

If programmes can be drafted and actions taken to resolve problems raised by socio-economic motions, I am sure that the federation and affiliates will be seen as more 'relevant' by members on the ground. It would also bring the federation and affiliates closer to the members and in such a way force members to become involved in their communities again, and also become socially responsible. Irritation of the day: Big numbers of comrades standing outside the congress hall having their own discussions. How are these comrades going to report back to their constituency?

All in all, congress was a learning curve for me as a first-time attendee.

Adriane C Cloete, Northern Cape, Namaqua Region

(These are edited versions of personal accounts of Sadtu members who attended the conference and appeared in the *Sadtu News*).

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