

Numsa tests its mettle

*Rebuilding union structures and organisation appears to be a common issue being addressed at union congresses. The **Labour Bulletin** highlights some of the key issues, which are likely to be debated at Numsa's 7th national congress in September 2004.*

It is clear from a review of the draft secretariat report to be debated at congress that one of the key issues to be dealt with is the union's organisational review process and staffing issues. The democratic process has imposed numerous challenges on the union and manifested itself in different ways on the shopfloor. The draft secretariat report pointed out that skilled shop stewards have left to take up positions in government or the private sector resulting in the quality of leadership in the union declining. Aside from the loss of experienced shop stewards, the union has lost officials in the last three years – it is now more urgent that the union develop strategies to counter these movements and keep the existing skills available in the union. The report says the union needs to develop incentives to keep worker leaders while addressing training and developing staff. It is necessary 'that we develop a programme aimed at grounding the leadership politically with the necessary skills to manage the organisation effectively while at the same time developing a second layer of leadership.'

The union's national congress in 2000 took a decision to take forward a number of Cosatu resolutions around building the organisation. The union

initiated an organisational renewal project, which sought to address the following type of issues:

- rebuilding locals;
- consolidating organisational and collective bargaining initiatives;
- strengthening leadership and management structures;
- renewing membership and financial systems;
- renewing membership benefits;
- reviewing staff development programmes; and
- general campaigns.

These issues emerged from identifying some of the main problems in the union which included poor service to members, weak organisation in workplaces and locals, a decline in membership and shop steward commitment, declining membership, a drop in union income while costs of servicing members was increasing and a lack of innovation and effectiveness in the union's decision-making structures and staff operation.

The union has introduced a range of new measures to rebuild local structures and improve service delivery to members by changing the way services are provided. This new approach has been piloted in the Western Cape, Wits and KwaZulu-Natal. The main elements include:

- The restructuring of locals and

deploying staff into specialist units in regional offices.

- Developing new systems of planning and ensuring the optimal utilisation of available human resources.
- Re-organising locals and building capacity to become service centres.

This approach was pursued because the union found that there has been an over reliance on local organisers by shop stewards. The secretariat report states that the new amendments (to the LRA) and in particular the new rules of the CCMA and the bargaining council dispute resolution centre means that organisers are increasingly being required to spend more time dealing with legal issues instead of building the organisation. The new approach is aimed at providing more capacity, focus on building structures and repositioning the union to service members properly.

Aside from organisational issues, the congress is likely to debate socio-economic issues, collective bargaining; politics around the alliance which is unlikely to change and the election of new office bearers. At this stage there is no final position on which office bearers will be challenged (aside from two vacant positions of first and second vice-presidents). However, tension is mounting in this area. It is hoped this tension will not divide the union yet again.

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