

# Politics looms larger than shopfloor

## Cosatu's 10th national congress

The Congress of South African Trade Unions holds three-yearly national congresses and the resolutions emerging from them are watched with great interest by South Africans. **Themba Masondo** attended its latest congress in September and gives a fresh, outsider's account of how the congress was conducted and what were the main issues dealt with.

**T**he Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) is amongst the most influential organisations in South Africa. Its political and organisational presence is so great that most of its activities and decisions are subjects for public discussion.

Cosatu's 10th national congress, held in Midrand in September, was an intriguing event that presented complex realities about the federation. The congress discussed and resolved on a range of important issues such as unionisation of workers in the military, climate change, banning of labour brokers, corporatisation of state assets, the green paper from the National Planning Commission, legalisation of sex work, Tripartite Alliance and the National Democratic Revolution.

The congress reaffirmed Cosatu as a reliable and powerful force committed to the transformation of society. However, the proceedings also exposed its oligarchic (rule by the few) character and an excessive focus on Alliance politics over shop-floor issues affecting workers.

### 'A UNITED CONGRESS'

The congress took place in a context characterised by a global economic recession and improved

relations within the ANC/SACP Communist Party Alliance (SACP). The political atmosphere was calm, jovial and delegates were articulate and tolerant towards each other. This can be attributed largely to leadership tussles being minimal compared to the previous congress.

The ANC 2007 Polokwane congress and the April general election also contributed to the consolidation of a united front. It was evident from the outset that Cosatu was celebrating the major political victories it had achieved together with the SACP and some ANC structures over recent turbulent times.

In his keynote address to the congress, ANC President Jacob Zuma thanked Cosatu for its support to the ANC in the general elections. General secretary Zwelinzima Vavi argued that it was no longer the case that Cosatu was "treated like an ordinary NGO" by the ANC. Cosatu president Sidumo Dlamini remarked that, "The revolution is back to its rightful owners".

The National Union of Metalworkers' (Numsa) Irvin Jim strongly argued that the federation was successful in dislodging "a particular elite holding back the wheels of history". This, according

to Dlamini, was the reason why "we [delegates] should spoil ourselves in this congress and celebrate the working class power and gains".

A delegate from the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) advised congress that the "business of conference is not leadership contestation". One delegate remarked that this was "a united congress of Cosatu", and another held a placard: 'We stand united'.

Attended by about 3 000 voting delegates and held under the theme 'Consolidating Working Class Power in Defense of Decent Work and Socialism', the congress was well organised and alive with anti-capitalist songs. On a sad note, the congress did not have all its 9th congress elected office bearers. Willie Madisha was expelled as president due to political wrangling within the federation; the first deputy president Violet Seboni passed away in a motor accident on her way to campaign for the ANC in the elections; and treasurer Alinah Rantsolase was deployed into parliament.

### SCANT FOCUS ON SHOPFLOOR

Some people chastise Cosatu for being too involved in politics at the expense of bread-and-butter issues affecting workers. Dlamini's defence

was that: “We hold a political responsibility in this country”. The congress was preoccupied with discussions on contemporary political challenges confronting the “National Democratic Revolution” and the Tripartite Alliance.

The president’s opening address and secretariat political report were more about Alliance politics than shop-floor issues. The SACP’s Blade Nzimande and the ANC’s Zuma spoke of the important role played by the federation in returning the ANC to its original mandate as an agent of real transformation. Absent was an attempt to discuss internal challenges confronting the federation such as organisational weaknesses in some regional and local structures, women’s leadership and representation and broadening knowledge on socio-economic issues.

The political report and address celebrated the leadership and policy outcomes from the 2007 ANC’s Polokwane congress, and how ‘doomsday prophets’, waiting for tensions in the Alliance, were disappointed by the improved working relations amongst Alliance partners.

On the floor, delegates held placards praising SACP and ANC leaders. One placard read ‘Zuma was born in Polokwane’, and another ‘BMW or what, Nzimande is our leader’. The latter was in response to the public outcry following Nzimande’s, as minister of

higher education and training, controversial and extravagant purchase of a R1.1m BMW 750i using taxpayers’ money.

According to Sakhela Buhlungu, this political tendency has weakened Cosatu’s “organizational vibrancy” on the shop floor. However, this is not to suggest that workers’ bread-and-butter issues were completely absent in discussions. There were some interesting discussions on banning labour brokers, casualisation, unionisation in the national defence force and the impact of the global economic recession on workers.

The secretariat organisational report also made an attempt to deal with shop-floor issues, but these were hardly discussed.

#### **BUT IS POLITICAL UNIONISM A BAD THING?**

Some unionists and commentators are rigidly opposed to Cosatu’s engagement with broader political and socio-economic issues. In their eyes, a union’s role is to defend workers’ interests alone. In other words, unions must have a narrow focus on wages and improving conditions.

I have a problem with this because it ignores that workplace issues are propelled by broader political and economic policies. Without a proactive engagement with these policies, unions are isolated in a counter-productive struggle against the effects, instead of fundamental causes, of workplace problems.

Cosatu should attempt to maintain a balance between political unionism and meaningful organisational vibrancy in the workplace. Excess of one over the other, as was the case during congress, can be dangerous.

For example, in his address Zuma defended the ANC’s decision to ban unions in the military. I found it strange that Vavi described Zuma’s address as “wonderful” and that through Zuma “we see ourselves as workers”. Hau! Vavi, what do you

mean? Is it ‘wonderful’ to ban unions in the military?

#### **INDEPENDENT FEDERATION**

A defining characteristic of national liberation movements is their political alliances with trade unions. In South Africa, this phenomenon manifests through the ‘strategic alliance’ between the ANC, SACP and Cosatu. Eddie Webster warns that a danger of such alliances is the curtailment of union independence.

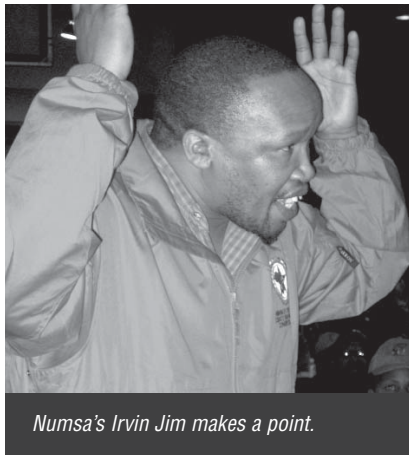
At least drawing on discussion during congress, it appears that Cosatu’s independence from its political allies remains intact. I was impressed with how delegates engaged ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe’s criticism that the federation’s approach to the Green Paper on National Strategic Planning was personally directed at former minister of finance and now minister in the presidency, Trevor Manuel.

Mantashe indicated that the ANC delegation to congress was “directed by the NEC to contribute to the building of a strong federation”. This did little to change delegates’ conviction that Manuel had a problematic history of undermining the Alliance, and Cosatu in particular, when developing important government policies.

The congress was unanimous in its rejection of the Green Paper as it sought to centralise government’s strategic planning in the National Planning Commission and encroach on functions of other departments, such as the Department of Economic Development. Vavi asked “who wants to be a popeye (lackey) in government?” He cautioned that if the Green Paper was approved most ministers would have little influence over the policy direction of their departments. He declared that Cosatu would “resist [the Green Paper] with all our power”. An Alliance Summit would be convened to discuss a range of strategic issues, including the Green Paper.

During discussions on the nationalisation of key industries, the

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*Numsa's Irvin Jim makes a point.*

deputy minister of public enterprises, Enoch Godongwana argued that “Eskom is fully in public hands; there is no need to nationalize”. According to delegates, this argument ignored that Eskom is run like a corporate business whose main strategic goal is profit maximisation. Numsa’s president Cedric Gina argued that the congress had a problem with Eskom’s quest for profit.

The ANC’s implicit attempt to persuade congress to accept its decision on de-unionisation in the military was also unanimously rejected. Numsa’s general secretary Irvin Jim and the South African Security Forces Union’s Bheki Mvovo were the most militant defenders of the dominant perspective that “soldiers and other military personnel have a right to freedom of association and to form trade unions”.

The National Education Health & Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) described the ANC’s decision on de-unionisation as “erroneous”, ironically in response to the ANC’s stance that it made an error to permit military unions in the first place. Rejecting the ANC’s decision to establish a Military Service Commission, some delegates held up placards saying, ‘There shall be no Military Service Commission’, whilst the Young Communist League’s Buti Manamela dismissed it as “a sweetheart process”.

Interestingly, some delegates went on to argue against the idea that the ANC is the leader of the Alliance. Sadtu’s president Thobile Ntola made this clear: “We have said that the political centre is the Alliance, not the ANC”. Dlamini went on to state that the federation’s “primary role is not to be spokesperson of government. We speak on behalf of our members”.

Concerned probably that congress would adopt resolutions extremely critical of the ANC, one of the ANC representatives, Billy Masethla advised congress to “engage with the Alliance partners



*Deputy minister of Public Enterprises, Enoch Godongwana and ANC secretary general, Gwede Mantashe attended the Congress.*

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so that we do not go into confrontation mode with government”.

This brought back memories of undergraduate sociology classes where Buhlungu and Webster spoke of Cosatu’s “flexible independence”, referring to Cosatu’s relationship with the ANC and SACP as both contradictory and complementary.

#### GOOD NEWS FOR GREENS?

Cosatu’s congress was historic in that for the first time it dedicated time to discussing a resolution on climate change. I thought such resolutions would come from industrial unions like mine, chemical, energy and metal workers, but surprisingly it was proposed by the teachers’ union.

Cosatu’s deputy general secretary Bheki Ntshahintshali reminded congress that the proposal on climate change was “a very important resolution of our times”. According to him it was unfortunate that unions “do not take climate change seriously”.

A few months before the congress, the federation’s national leadership organised a climate change workshop. Most affiliates did not attend. Notwithstanding, the congress’s discussion and resolutions on climate change hold promise for its future role in combating environmental degradation.

Sadtu proposed that Cosatu consider putting pressure on

government to “invest in new green technologies in order to create new kinds of skills and jobs whilst reducing the carbon footprint”, encourage recycling of waste and more efficient use of energy, and embark on an environmental education programme to encourage behavioural changes in citizens.

These resolutions were adopted with an addition from a delegate that environmentally unfriendly projects such as Coega in the Eastern Cape be discouraged. The federation also resolved to lobby for its resolution at the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. However, only time will tell if it is serious about tackling the deadly environmental crisis.

Jackie Cock argues that government development models should be shaped by the environmental crisis. Congress’ discussion document titled ‘Climate Change and its Impact on Development’ makes an excellent analysis on the link between climate change and development. The document acknowledged that climate change is caused by an obsession with economic growth and job creation, but it lacked alternative environmental-friendly development models.

The congress proceedings clearly showed that Cosatu is an oligarchic organisation in the sense that decision making on some issues is the responsibility of a select few leaders.



The congress was divided on the legalisation of sex work and the acceptability of violence in strikes. In its attempt to persuade congress to agree to its resolution on the legalisation of sex work, the police union argued convincingly that the sex work industry “is increasing at an alarming pace within the country” and that workers in this industry are subjected to serious abuse.

This resolution was supported by the municipal, commercial, catering, transport, metal, mining and nurses’ unions and the SACP. The South African Transport & Allied Workers Union seconded the resolution with the addition that sex work be prohibited in trucks, buses, flights and trains. SACP’s Nzimande advised that the federation must be careful not “to move ahead of society” and that it must “bring our people along”. A delegate from NUM held a placard saying: ‘Legalize and regulate sex work’.

However, Sadtu’s Ntola differed with the proposed resolution: “This motion has far reaching implications, it need not be rushed. We are building a nation here”. The chemical union agreed albeit on cultural and moral grounds: “We must bring back our culture. When are we going to de-Westernize Africa? We must go back to our African morality.” The

heated differences amongst affiliates compelled Dlamini repeatedly to appeal to delegates to be patient and avoid intolerance.

I thought the congress had the capacity to resolve this but, to my surprise, Dlamini decided to “defer this matter to the Central Executive Committee (CEC)”.

In summarising the political report, without any prior discussion or resolutions, Vavi informed congress that, “Violence has no place in our struggle. Trashing of streets and emptying bins has no place”. This later turned into a heated debate on what constitutes a ‘violent’ and ‘militant’ strike.

The South African Municipal Workers Union’s president Petrus Mashishi disagreed with Vavi and argued that his union had never embarked on a violent strike. It seemed there was a lack of will by affiliates to get into the details around the acceptability of violence in strikes.

Numsa believed that this debate was misplaced since there was no sponsored resolution. Gina further stated that “we cannot discuss tactics of a strike in a conference” and that the CEC was an appropriate structure to resolve this matter. Satawu’s Randall Howard concurred: “This is not a platform to discuss

violence in strikes”. Finally, the congress deferred the issue to a CEC.

Despite this, Vavi continued to inform congress that “Cosatu does not condone violence and intimidation during strikes”, but he was called to order.

These two scenarios represent the oligarchic organisation that Cosatu has become as the two issues were referred to the CEC for resolution. Other resolutions not discussed due to time constraints were also referred to the CEC for resolution.

This seems to be a tendency in Cosatu’s recent congresses. In a 2006 *Labour Bulletin* Devan Pillay reported that the Cosatu congress deferred “key resolutions, including those related to organizational matters” to the CEC. Whereas Pillay reports that debates were dominated by presidents and general secretaries, participation was broader in the 10th national congress.

### ALL ROUND CONGRESS

The dynamism of the congress was its ability to deal with contemporary socio-economic challenges. It dealt with important social issues such as HIV/AIDS, transformation in education, food security, challenges facing farm workers and farm dwellers, international issues, fiscal and monetary policies, industrial policy and a National Health Insurance (NHI).

On the NHI, the congress endorsed and medical association resolution that “Cosatu members monitor the implementation of the NHI thus holding the Ministerial Advisory Committee accountable to the priorities outlined in the framework”.

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