

Samwu 9th Congress

Deepening working-class consciousness?

Samwu's 9th Congress took place in the midst of a deepening economic crisis and intense debate about the practices of labour brokers who grossly exploit their workers.

Crispen Chinguno attended the congress and gives his impressions of what drove the debate and resolutions.

Last year the South African Municipal & Allied Workers Union (Samwu) held its 9th congress at the Aventura resort and conference centre in Bela Bela, Limpopo from 3 to 6 November. It attracted over 500 delegates and visitors. Conducted under the theme 'Deepening working-class consciousnesses towards 2015 plan', it happened at a critical moment and could be a landmark step forward or backward.

It took place in the wake of the global economic crisis and the crisis of capitalism. This had resulted in an unprecedented job loss in South Africa. Over 400 000 jobs were lost in the 2009 third quarter alone and official unemployment escalated from 23.6% in the second quarter to 24.5% in the third quarter.

Despite this, workers engaged in one of the most successful strikes in the history of the municipal sector. This resulted in a 13% wage award, which became the benchmark for other sectors together with a 13% filling of vacant posts. This was reported by Congress of South African Unions (Cosatu) general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi in his address to the congress. Samwu membership also grew by about 10% since its last congress bringing its total membership to 136 000.

In this context I expected robust and important discussions charting the way forward. This article gives my impressions.

END OF AN ERA

The congress witnessed the 'stepping' down of Samwu founding president, Petros Mashishi who has been at the helm since 1987. Divisions amongst the delegates over his re-election were marked but expressed mainly through songs and slogans. The 'roll-over' hand signals used by soccer fans for a player substitution were much in evidence. It soon became apparent that a leadership change was inevitable.

Some delegates strongly felt that he had done a splendid job and deserved re-election. One of his supporters said: 'We surely cannot lose a good leader just for change. We should review how he had championed Samwu over the years and without prejudice, it is one of the shining stars of Cosatu.'

Others felt that he had played his part but it was time to move on. One delegate remarked: 'We do not want a Mugabe. We want fresh hands. We should never allow anyone to be a leader forever.'

Mashishi apparently had the support of most regions: Free State,

Mpumalanga, Eastern Cape and Northern and Western Cape. These however, are smaller in terms of membership and hence had fewer voting delegates compared to the major regions: Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo which opposed his re-election. This raises an important question. How can the voice of smaller regions be protected from the hegemony of bigger regions in the context of internal union democracy? It proved that it is very difficult to win an election without the support of mega regions such as Gauteng.

In the end a new president, Sam Malope, was elected after a tight contest of 190 votes to 177 for Mashishi. The election raised a question on whether or not unions should have constitutional provisions capping leadership's term of office in line with the trend in political parties.

Other posts were less contested and the new national office bearers are: Mthandeki Hlapo - general secretary, Nomvula Hadi - first deputy president, Ntokozo Nzuzo - second deputy president, Gathi Maleti - treasurer, and Ntoahae Walter Theledi - deputy general secretary. This was a mix of the old and new guard.



Long time president Petros Mashishi was ousted (left). New office bearers (from left) Walter Theledi (deputy general secretary), Ntokozo Nzuza (2nd deputy president), Mthandeki Nhlapo (general secretary), Nomvula Hadi (1st deputy president), Gati Maleti (national treasurer) and Sam Molohe (president).

ALLIANCE RELATIONS

The congress followed the famous 2007 Polokwane ANC congress at which those supporting the neo-liberal agenda were displaced by those on the left. Evaluating the alliance, Vavi reported improvements in Cosatu's relationship with the new government.

'In seven months we have had 20 meetings with the new government which is more than we had in ten years with the previous government. This clearly indicates a paradigm shift as doors are now more open.' He however indicated that labour was apprehensive about the lack of progress. 'It is early days still, but I must say we are beginning to be nervous about the slow pace at which we are moving into this new direction.'

Not everyone agreed with Vavi. 'We will only recognize and celebrate improvement if there are agreements in terms of policy. We do not measure progress by the number of meetings with the minister,' argued a delegate from Limpopo.

The state and relevance of the

Alliance was analysed. This was opportune since an Alliance summit was scheduled for the end of the year. There was a clear difference in opinion between union leadership and the lower structures on the state and continued relevance of the Alliance. While the leadership believed the Alliance was working well, on the shop floor there were big divisions, clashes and disillusionment about its success.

The congress theme was 'deepening of working-class consciousness' and Vavi lamented the poor support that workers gave to the South African Communist Party (SACP), which posed a threat to the attainment of socialism. He cited a recent survey which reported that industrial workers constituted only 40% of SACP membership.

A delegate suggested a review of the Alliance and the need to look into the possibility of disbanding it in ten years. He justified this by claiming that workers felt betrayed by the SACP who have 'been co-opted into parliament and government and now turn a blind eye on workers... Before, these

comrades vehemently opposed the SACP going into government and yet now they are doing the opposite.'

The opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) support is strong in the Western Cape. Some members of Samwu are active in the DA. This is inconsistent with Samwu/Cosatu policies which view the ANC as a true friend of the working class. This raised questions. What relationship should a political party and trade union maintain? Can a worker belong to both the DA and Samwu/Cosatu? Should municipal workers be active in politics?

Following heated debate, delegates agreed that unions should organise across political affiliations and members should not be compelled to belong to the ANC. This however, was not a unanimous position, which was reflected in the songs and slogans expressed resentment to opposition to the ANC. This reflected high levels of intolerance for a divergent perspective.

Cosatu had previously passed a resolution on 'swelling' the ranks of the ANC. The Samwu congress

resolved to maintain its support for the ANC in the 2011 local government elections. However, there was debate and no consensus on whether the support should be unconditional.

It was proposed that local government councillors should be permanent to address growing service delivery protests. This was rejected as delegates argued that councillors who are permanent are ineffectual. It was not clear whether this position came from the argument that most councillors turn against unions once elected.

Many shop stewards have been suspended for holding union meetings and many municipalities engage in union bashing. There were no easy answers as to why ANC comrades once elected as councillors become enemies of workers.

Delegates resolved to disband the three-tier system of governance by removing provincial structures to enhance efficiency.

LACK OF TRANSFORMATION

One of the legacies of apartheid is the lack of black people in key positions both in government and the private sector. Unions are some of the key drivers of transformation and employment equity.

Gauteng and Limpopo regions sponsored a motion alleging lack of employment equity and organisational transformation in Samwu. They claimed that most senior jobs were the preserve of whites and coloureds and the union was reproducing an apartheid workplace regime. This generated heated debate which exposed internal divisions.

The congress resolved that employment equity must inform future recruitment. The CEC

(Central Executive Committee) was tasked to discuss the issue and ensure compliance.

LOCATION OF HEAD OFFICE

Samwu's head office is in Cape Town, a city which was closely involved in the union's history. However, discussions to move the head office to Johannesburg have been ongoing since 1987. This has deeply divided the union along regional, political and racial lines (black and coloured).

Gauteng and Limpopo proposed a motion to move head office to Johannesburg supported by KwaZulu-Natal, North West and Mpumalanga but opposed by the Eastern and Western Cape, Mpumalanga and Free State. Some viewed this as moving to the centre of events whilst others saw it as moving beyond DA influence. The incoming president in his acceptance speech acknowledged that the congress was deeply divided and that 'the issue has potential to rip the union apart'.

Although the majority agreed on the move, the issue was referred to the CEC for feasibility assessment, which reflected weak internal democracy based on worker control.

Further probing revealed the belief that Samwu should not have a head office in DA territory. This is tied to covert racial and political contestation between Africans and coloureds who dominate the Cape Town region and were the majority membership at the union's inception. The tide has since turned in favour of Gauteng.

During apartheid struggles Africans, coloureds and Indians accepted 'black' as a common identity. In this current contestation, it is a mystery as to what happened to this identity. Heated and protracted debate on the transfer of the head office

and lack of transformation overshadowed other issues and were the most contentious. This exposed tensions and divisions within the union along political, regional and ethnic lines, which pose a challenge to the union's collective identity.

SAMWU SERIOUS ABOUT BROKERS?

One of the major challenges facing organised labour in South Africa is the substitution of permanent jobs with labour-broker insecure temporary jobs. This poses a threat to decent work and the existence of unions. There is currently an intense debate on whether brokers should be banned or regulated.

This issue was discussed in one of the panels where international guests were invited to share experiences. Gabes Andumba, deputy general secretary of Namibia Public Workers Union (NAPWU), spoke of Namibia's experience after the government recently banned brokers. The president of Unison, UK, Gerry Gallagher gave an account of experience with temporary employment services. This was designed to stimulate comparative discussion with an international dimension.

However, debate on political and organisational issues overshadowed important matters such as labour broking and collective bargaining. These issues were pushed forward to the CEC for discussion, which posed the question on how serious the union is about such matters.

Although debate on labour broking was brushed aside one of the delegates commented on the congress taking place at a tourist resort detached from the 'real' South Africa. In an effort to feel this 'real' life, a tour was organised to the local community.



Recent statistics show South Africa as the most unequal society in the world. This was easy to observe. Poverty levels in the local community were alarming and in clear contrast with the five-star treatment at the congress.

Arrangements were made to meet local alliance leadership. There had been massive protests in the community against poor service delivery and nepotism by the mayor who earlier on addressed the congress. Workers employed at the congress venue, had together with the community, organised protests against poor working conditions and labour brokers a week earlier. A shop steward and some of the workers were suspended.

Without the tour, this probably would not have been exposed. An Alliance local leader remarked: 'We are shocked why Samwu could be hosted and collaborate with an enemy of the working class. We were in the process of organising another protest during the congress so that you would see we mean business. How could comrades go in bed with the enemy? A meeting was arranged with the top Samwu leadership for the local Alliance leadership to present their grievances.

These leaders lamented how the

Alliance was dysfunctional at grassroots levels and yet this was ignored by leadership. There were hardly any Alliance meetings in the local community. Whilst the Alliance may be functioning at national level, service delivery protests exposed this was not the case at the grassroots.

I was touched by these contradictions exposed by local leadership and so conducted a further probe. The over 200 workers employed at the resort, neatly dressed in black and white uniforms, were not easy to observe amongst the congress delegates in union regalia. It was hard to talk to them as they were engrossed in their work. However, I interviewed some during the course of their duties, out of their bosses' sight.

One worker was 23-year-old Jabu from the local community. He finished matric five years ago and has never had a permanent job. He works temporarily and is mostly engaged by labour brokers. He is not a union member and has never been in contact with one. He lamented his poor working conditions and that he did not know who his exact employer was. He earns R10.50 per hour and works 18 hours a day.

Jabu was serving a congress with the theme 'deepening working-

class consciousness'. This however, was not known by him and raised questions for me. Why are unions failing to utilise their 'corporate' muscle against labour brokers? Why does Samwu fail to work with the South Commercial Catering & Allied Workers Union to ensure they conduct business with employers/organisations that respect decent work and workers' rights? Samwu has the goal to 'deepen working-class consciousnesses'. Why then is it failing to reach out and protect vulnerable workers such as Jabu?

CONCLUSION

The congress showed Samwu's colourful past but also its uncertain future. It was dominated by political debates and organisational issues. It surprisingly paid lip service to more shop floor issues, such as collective bargaining and labour broking. These were pushed to the CEC in contradiction with Samwu's culture of worker-centred control and democracy, where members are the driving force.

The congress exposed a divided union especially along racial, regional and political lines. These ironically were at the centre of the struggle against apartheid. According to the outgoing president the congress was deeply divided and 'the worst in the history of the organisation in the manner proceedings were conducted'.

The major challenge for the new executive is to ensure that the union remains intact. If Samwu cannot seriously address the challenges and contradictions that face it, the goal to 'deepening working-class consciousness' will remain elusive. LB

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