

Satawu Congress celebrates power in numbers

Jane Barrett reports on Satawu's 2nd National Congress where some interesting and fresh resolutions were taken.

Meeting, from 12 to 15 September, Satawu was the last of Cosatu affiliates to hold its Congress before the federation's 9th Congress. Attending were 517 delegates representing the transport, security, cleaning, and dry cleaning sectors. Satawu's second national congress took place in Boksburg. The union was founded in 2000 in a merger between the former Satawu (previously Sarhwa and Blatu) and the Transport and General Workers' Union. It followed hot on the heels of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) Congress which was hosted by Satawu in Durban in early August.

The number of delegates present was almost double those at the union's 1st national congress in 2003, due to a phenomenal increase in membership during the period. In 2003 the union declared a membership of 88 000. It now claims 130 000. The biggest growth has been in the security sector, with membership rising dramatically during the national strike earlier this year.

Satawu's Congress was significant in other respects too. An unprecedented number of 33 resolutions were submitted by the union's regions and sectors, as well as a large number of constitutional amendments. Unusually, all the business of the Congress was concluded. A few items, including a decision on a possible subscription change and a debate on whether the SACP should contest the 2009 national general election, were referred to the union's Central Executive Committee for further discussion.

The Congress identified young workers as an important constituency for recruitment and organisation. Delegates resolved to draw on local youth and international trade union experiences in developing a strategy to target young workers. A conference of young Satawu members will be called to discuss issues that concern them.

Workers with disabilities were also identified as a constituency with special interests. Debate was inspired by the contradictory reality that while the implementation of employment equity has resulted in greater numbers of disabled workers being employed, at the same time employers remain the 'perpetrators' of disability through unsafe work practices. The rate of disabling accidents is particularly high in the railway sector, where workers regularly lose limbs in the shunting environment. The resolution noted that "most able-

bodied members and leaders remain ignorant of the needs of workers with disabilities", and resolved to establish a Disabled Workers' Forum. The Forum will help to identify the needs and aspirations of workers with disabilities and will assist in educating union membership on these issues.

A considerable amount of time was dedicated to debating gender issues. Various constitutional amendments were agreed giving the union's gender structures greater representation at provincial and national level. In debating a resolution on gender work in the union, the delegates reflected on some of the conclusions of the union's 2005 Collective Bargaining Conference. The Congress endorsed these conclusions, including that more women organisers should be employed, and that the imbalance of men conducting collective bargaining should be redressed. The same resolution also committed the union to calling a national Satawu women's conference. A second gender resolution focused specifically on the need to develop a women's leadership programme within the union.

A resolution on HIV/AIDS was to the point in resolving that the union should "campaign for the recognition of HIV/AIDS as a national disaster", and to demand that government expedite the roll-out of treatment. Delegates committed the union to campaigning against stigmatisation and discrimination. It was also



Satawu's Gender Committees were given greater representation

agreed that the union should develop guidelines for Employee Assistant Programmes (EAPs) in respect of HIV/AIDS. In talking to the resolution, General Secretary Randall Howard made an impassioned call for the dismissal of Health Minister 'Dr African Potatoe' Manto Tshabalala Msimang.

Congress delegates didn't mince their words on the subject of police brutality and state repression during strikes and protest actions. A resolution noted that brutality of police officers in the face of protests and strikes, as well as the increasing tendency of the state to pursue malicious prosecutions of striking workers. The resolution called for an enquiry to be conducted by the Human Rights Commission. Satawu delegates to the Cosatu Congress the following week spoke passionately to a similar resolution submitted by the Police and Prison Civil Rights Union (Popcru).

The most dynamic debate of the Congress was on the union's position on the National Democratic Revolution, the Alliance, and State Power. The issue most hotly contested was whether or not the SACP should field candidates in the 2009 general election. "The ANC has been politically reckless by ignoring the mandate of the poor and working class," raged one delegate. But the answer, he said, lay in reclaiming the ANC. Another

delegate argued that the growing wealth gap between rich and poor means that independent contestation by the SACP would be correct. In the end, it was agreed that the Alliance is in crisis. But the question of whether this means that the SACP should contest the next election was referred to union structures for further debate. It was accepted that the decision would ultimately be made by Party structures.

While debate on most issues was constructive, the Congress was not without its tensions. A resolution entitled 'Future of security workers in Satawu' and submitted by the security sector was withdrawn after some brittle exchanges on the Congress floor. The resolution alleged that "since Satawu was founded, there have been people in the union who have argued that security workers do not belong in Satawu", and called for the Congress to reaffirm that security workers are a legitimate component of Satawu. The resolution was withdrawn in favour of a statement of affirmation of the union's founding constitution.

While this formally resolved the issue, it did not stop the matter resurfacing informally in the electioneering which took place in the run-up to the contested election of general secretary. Those campaigning for sitting Deputy General Secretary Johnson Gamede,

were able to mobilise a sizeable number of delegates on the basis that sitting General Secretary Randall Howard was alleged to have paid "too much attention and devoted too many resources" to members in the security sector. Statements made by some transport delegates during the informal electioneering reflected a somewhat reactionary elitism, running counter to the trade union notion of solidarity. While Howard won the election comfortably with 297 votes to 192, the tension points to the ongoing challenge of building unity across the union's sectors.

Gamede's challenge to Howard left the position of deputy general secretary to be contested by two national officials, Stephen Motingoa and Nelson Lamityi. In what turned out to be a neck and neck race, Lamityi won by two votes. All four sitting worker office bearers were returned unopposed. Ezrom Mabyana remains President, June Dube is First Vice President, Robert Mashego Second Vice President, and Nadeema Syms is National Treasurer. Archie Sibeko (known by many as Zola Zembe) was re-elected as Honorary President.

Speakers at the Congress included Jacob Zuma for the ANC, Jeremy Cronin for the SACP, and Stuart Howard for the ITE Past elected national office bearers of the union's predecessors were honoured at an evening function. Recipients included Sam Shilowa, former president of TGWU, and Derek Simoko and Martin Sebokwane, both former general secretaries of Sarwhu.

Satawu's next national congress will be held in four year's time.

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