

Sector summits whats cooking?

Sector summits have been a Cosatu staple for many years. But what have they achieved? Are they meeting union expectations?

The decision to hold sector summits was made at the Presidential Jobs Summit in 1998. The resolve to strengthen the sector-based approach was confirmed during the Growth and Development Summit (GDS) in June 2003 with the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) continuing to co-ordinate the sector summits as they come on board.

Sector summits have been held in mining, clothing and textile, ICT and public sectors, while much work has been done to ensure summits are held in metal and engineering, automobile manufacturing through the MIDP and chemicals and construction. Nedlac has indicated that summits could also be held in the services and agriculture and agro-processing sectors.

Who remains committed?

Without the commitment of government and business, what can summits deliver? Business and government commitment aside, the success of summits and more specifically post-summit processes depends on whether unions have enough resources to be vigilant in monitoring actions and ensuring implementation.

For example, what has happened to the post-summit ICT process that is supposed to be continuing in Nedlac? Are parties complying with agreements reached at the summit? Various sources

indicated that there have been some problems with getting organisations such as Telkom to comply. There have been some concerns around claims of further retrenchments since the summit and the initial refusal of the company to disclose various company procedures and guidelines around procurement.

Aside from implementation problems, what about monitoring? Is this being done and do unions have the capacity to do it? There is also the issue of staff turnover and continuity within Nedlac.

Why sector summits?

While the demand for sector summits emerged from within the ranks of Cosatu, does this mean that all unions are pushing for sector summits? One source says that where unions have the capacity to drive summits they have done so. But another source expressed concern whether all unions support summits because they require a different way of operating. Some affiliates have expressed concerns around the extent to which they participated in the process. Was there sufficient buy-in by affiliates? Sector summits are a different way of approaching things politically. For unions it means moving from an environment where parties are reactive, to an environment where unions are working with business and dealing, at times, with abstract issues that do not

necessarily show tangible results immediately.

Summits and charters

Over the last year, headlines have been dominated by talk of black economic empowerment (BEE) charters. Is there any attempt to ensure some sort of co-ordination between the charter and sector summit processes as both are critical in determining the future structure of key sectors in the economy? Are unions engaging the the charter process? Some might argue that charters are a way of removing labour from processes of restructuring sectors, but is that the case?

In the same vein, one source says that the charter process is a way for government and business to control a process.

Conclusion

There is a real sense that government is not committed to the sector summit process – even though it is funding research and capacity building within unions through the dti. There is a sense in government circles that such processes do not produce tangible results so consideration should be given to specific interventions that do make a difference. Therefore from government's side there is little incentive to engage. Business will support the summits where it serves their interest otherwise their commitment is questionable. So where does this leave labour? 18