

Some background to Numsa's 8th Congress

Mziwakhe Hlangani gives some background to the political and organisational resolutions that will be discussed at Numsa's National Congress in mid October.

Read this slogan for our Congress: "For advancement of peoples' real economic power – the metalworkers' struggle towards Numsa 8th Elective National Congress" and know it is not said as an exaggeration or in rage.

Our political programmes will centre on the ANC, SACP and Cosatu tripartite alliance as a way of defining our organisational roles and political tasks for the next four years.

On 13-16 October 2008 the giant National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) holds its national congress at Emerald Casino in Vanderbijlpark, Sedibeng to chart the way forward. It takes place in an epoch characterised by deepening contradictions.

It is a moment to manage all these bewildering concerns. It is a moment to ensure that the majority is set free from the bondage of extreme poverty in the second decade of South Africa's democracy so that the working class rather than the capitalist class benefits most.

Since the historic democratic political dispensation in 1994 global economic patterns have entered the workplace resulting in destructive restructuring in both the public and private sectors. In

the context of this imperialist onslaught, the gap between the rich and poor has widened and South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Neo-liberal global economic restructuring has resulted in the brutalisation of work which has led to the reduction in workers' incomes, the systematic erosion of benefits, an increase in casualisation and an assault on labour standards.

The unexpected nationwide uprisings by communities against government's poor service delivery has set the stage for counter-revolutionary forces to undermine the democratic government.

In the period between 2004 and 2008, difficult issues have emerged. These include lapses in state security, the leaking of the Special Browse Mole report, sadistic crime by organised syndicates, and the recent outbreak of xenophobic attacks against foreign aliens.

The latter affected us more than mere statistical reports, as Numsa struggle champion and shop steward Walter Ntombela who was also a local shop steward's campaigns committee chairperson for the past ten years in the Jet Park engineering firm, South East of Johannesburg, was murdered for being a Mozambican national. In paying tribute to him, we pledged

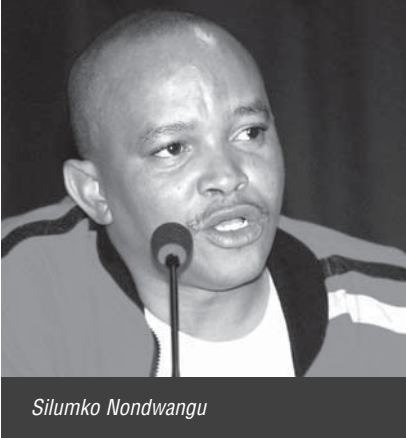
to continue our national education programmes against xenophobia and tribalism in factory workshops throughout the country.

In the design and implementation of the political programme three core objectives of Numsa's struggle will be kept in mind. These are that the political centre must be properly defined and constituted as a representative force of the alliance capable of executing the tasks set by the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). Alliance structures must be reviewed so that all partners can play a meaningful role in pursuing the NDR. And finally there should be thorough preparation for a transition programme from capitalism to socialism. These objectives in essence underpin Numsa resolutions.

Another consideration will be the divisions manifested at the ANC Polokwane Conference in December 2007 which showed in Cosatu as affiliates backed different factions. The federation's assessment of the conference conceded that it had compromised internal unity and broken down the bond that brings leaders together in the movement.

The divisions in the ANC spilled over into Cosatu affiliates, as Numsa general secretary Silumko

William Matlala



Silumko Nondwangu

Nondwangu frankly asserts in the Congress secretariat report. These divisions manifested in Cosatu leaders contesting positions in opposing ANC factional lists. These sectional battles continue to haunt the movement and if not managed skillfully threaten to breed worse divisions and a gloomy future for our organisations.

Our 7th National Congress made note of the fact that there seemed to be two ANCs – one in

government and another in ANC headquarters at Lithuli House. Our resolution noted the multi-class character of the ANC and that we must work hard to swell the ranks of the ANC and provide working-class leadership in the ANC at branch, regional, provincial and national leadership levels.

The formation of Numsa was not an accident. And moving forward to consolidate metalworker's hegemony, we will continue to debate the nature and content of the role of the trade union movement in the post-democratic dispensation.

The Numsa 8th National Congress takes place in a dramatically changed atmosphere, both politically and organisationally, which requires us to respond to new challenges, among others:

- How do we understand the phases of struggle and their significance in organisational and political terms which

shaped Numsa since its formation and how do we navigate challenges in relation to organisational independence and political policies?

- How do we continue to embrace in the organisation, the varied and divergent views representing the totality of our members, their backgrounds and traditions?
- Do we have a common vision of how to deal with the challenges in the organisational and political landscape that have set one comrade against another?
- How do we pursue struggles for an end to economic exploitation and embrace the legacy of heroes like Moses Mayekiso, Numsa's first general secretary Daniel Dube, and Percy Thomas and many other unsung heroes?

Mziwakhe Hlangani is the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's (Numsa) head of secretariat and information.

Some resolutions to be discussed

Some of the key resolutions on rebuilding the character of the organisation talk to worker leaders reclaiming leadership control of the organisation; and the tightening of the accountability process by improving report-back mechanisms and enhancing the mandating process at all levels of the organisation.

One region emphasised that currently worker control is very low throughout the organisation. It emphasised that no leader in the organisation should take a decision on behalf of Numsa members without a mandate, and then justify this by arguing that he or she 'is not a postal messenger for workers'. The resolution goes further to call on the congress to declare this lack of accountability a serious and punishable offence.

On strike funds, a resolution argues that previous congresses had agreed on the need for a strike fund, but this had not yet been put into practice. The congress is asked to resolve that the first central committee meeting after congress should begin working on details of making the fund operational in order to support striking workers in difficult times.

The congress will also discuss the three-year bargaining strategy in order to clearly define its objectives. It will seek a resolution on the extension of Numsa's organisational renewal project in all regions. It asks the congress to stress the adoption of a programme to improve efficiency in rendering effective service to membership and to launch well-planned mass recruitment campaigns.