



The ANC Conference: *gearing to struggle for power*

All eyes were on the ANC national conference in July: decisions taken there would have a far-reaching impact on our country's future. Organisational and strategic weaknesses, negotiations, mass action, the tripartite alliance, and affirmative action for women were among the issues debated. Most important, a new leadership was elected. MOSS NGOASHENG was there.*

The ANC held its first national conference since 1960 inside the country in July. The five day conference had a number of aims:

- to mould the different strands of the organisation into a fighting organ capable of dislodging the apartheid regime from power;
- to review the organisation's performance since its unbanning;
- to chart an overall strategic perspective needed for the struggles ahead;
- to elect a new leadership capable of leading the South African masses to

power;

- and to debate and adopt policies in a whole range of areas from economic policy, and constitutional principles to health and social welfare policies.

The conference, held in Durban, brought together over 2 000 delegates from fourteen regions and external regions, including a strong contingent from the ANC's armed wing, MK. The mood was set by outgoing President OR Tambo in his presidential address: "We welcome you, conscious of the fact that you have come here propelled by a burning

desire to make this conference the last one we ever shall have to hold under minority rule."

Can this desire be translated into reality? History will tell. But a lot will depend on how the ANC leads and channels the energies of the masses in the months ahead.

The conference was not only significant to ANC members and supporters - it would have to come up with a clear policy and programme of action for defeating the NP regime *politically*. The importance was recognised by local and

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foreign journalists who roamed around the conference hall everyday, reporting to the world on all important decisions. The number of foreign dignitaries, from Cuba to China, the USSR to the USA, from the OAU to the UN, also underlined its significance. In the words of OR Tambo: "Given our people's and the world's impatience with oppression, decisions emanating from this conference must infuse South Africa and our entire region with consequences of historical magnitude."

Struggle for power

Debates and resolutions adopted at the conference were marked by a strong commitment to continue the struggle against apartheid. While there was recognition that negotiations constitute a victory, delegates argued that the NP regime has no intention of negotiating itself out of power. As one delegate observed: "No ruling class has ever negotiated itself out of power. Power is always taken and in order to take power, to transfer power to the people, we need to intensify the struggle against the regime."

Nelson Mandela made the same point in his opening address: "We must engage in successful defensive battles against the counter-revolution at the same time as we conduct successful offensive battles to defeat the apartheid system. This is a

struggle we must fight on all fronts simultaneously." This was echoed in the resolution on negotiations: "To achieve the strategic objective of our struggle, it is vital that we continue to combine all forms of the struggle, drawing the widest spectrum of the people."

Delegates unanimously agreed that the ANC should remain a national liberation movement until democracy is achieved. They reaffirmed the strategic perspective of 'four pillars of struggle' - mass action, the underground, armed struggle and international isolation. The resolution on strategy and tactics recognised that negotiations and mass actions constitute the key weapons of struggle at this point in time, but argued that it would be premature to completely abandon armed struggle.

Negotiation and struggle

Delegates resolved that "the speedy realisation of the democratic settlement requires that negotiations which constitute an additional terrain of struggle should be linked to a continuing mass struggle and international pressure." Conference acknowledged that a negotiated settlement is possible, but argued that agreements reached through negotiations should represent victories won on the ground and not dilute those victories. Consequently, in keeping with a position adopted in the December 1990

consultative conference, delegates resolved that "negotiations shall not be secret". They reaffirmed the position that all the people should be involved in negotiations.

But, unlike the December conference, this time there was an important qualification: the NEC was invested "with the discretionary powers, within the policies of the ANC" during talks about talks. For its part, through Nelson Mandela's opening address, the NEC pointed out that the ANC must enter into negotiations with a clear vision of what it wants to achieve, a clear view of the procedures that the organisation's negotiators must follow to ensure that they are "properly mandated and that they report back" to the members. This perspective of profound democratic practice stands in sharp contrast to Mandela's closing address at the December conference, which tended to water down the principles of democratic accountability.

The perspective of an all-party conference, interim government and an elected constituent assembly were reaffirmed as the best way of proceeding towards a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa. Delegates gave the new NEC a mandate to proceed speedily to the formation of a Patriotic Front of all anti-apartheid forces.

Delegates agreed with

Nelson Mandela's opening address that "the winning of the objective of a constituent assembly will not be achieved solely through the negotiations process. It will require the generation of mass support for this demand."

The role of the tripartite alliance in the negotiations also came under scrutiny. Delegates expressed concern at the ineffective functioning of the alliance. Conference directed the incoming NEC to "take immediate steps to ensure the creation of appropriate and effective mechanisms for the involvement of the allies of the ANC in the process (of talks about talks) to negotiations."

The need to strengthen the alliance and to ensure its effective functioning as a fighting alliance was reflected in most of the debates. There was overwhelming recognition by delegates of the urgent need to form alliance structures at the grass-roots level of branches, as well as at regional and national levels. For example, the resolution on sanctions recommended that a meeting/conference be convened as soon as possible to map out a strategy on arresting the erosion of sanctions and to give a lead in this terrain.

The conference also observed that the obstacles to full-scale negotiations still remain. Violence was identified as an added obstacle to negotiations. A multi-pronged strategy to the violence was outlined:



Nelson Mandela: "We must engage in defensive battle and offensive battle ..."

Photo: Southlight

first, to continue seeking a peaceful resolution to the violence;
secondly, to support the peace initiative of the church and business leaders;
thirdly, to embark on a publicity campaign locally and internationally to expose the true nature of the violence;
 and **finally and most importantly**, to "establish structures on a branch level, regional and national level within the tripartite alliance and other democratic formations to coordinate strategies in responding to the violence".

The new NEC was mandated to give deadlines to appropriate structures by which time they should complete forming defence units. MK's new role as defender of peace and the people's rights, was seen to be central to this process.

Organisational weaknesses

The reports of the secretary general and the organising committee were hard hitting and realistic in assessing the ANC's organisational weaknesses. The most serious was that the ANC lacks a systematic and strategic approach on how to maintain deep and wide connections with the masses.

This was more evident from the campaigns of the past year. The reports argued that, in determining the forms of mass action, the ANC does not sufficiently consider the changed situation and the new dynamics. "We are re-active and not pro-active," says the secretary-general's report. Criticism is also levelled at the organisation for not consulting adequately, and in time, with its allies and other anti-apartheid organisations

The Women's Question

One of the most significant events during the conference was the six hour debate on the issue of women's representation within the structures of the ANC. A clause in the draft constitution presented to conference proposed that women should constitute 30% of all the leadership structures. This was the subject of intense debate. On the one hand, there was strong opposition to this proposal - almost exclusively by men! All sorts of arguments were advanced. Few were overtly sexist, being cloaked in the usual reasonable terms.

The most popular argument against this proposal was that ANC leaders are not elected on the basis of gender, but on the basis of their achievement and track record within the organisation. This view might appear to be reasonable, but women delegates responded that it ignores certain social and structural constraints within the present society which inhibit women's participation. Women's 'achievement' and 'track record' is greatly affected by all these constraints. The 30% proposal, they argued, was therefore an important process by which the ANC could seek to address the question of women's participation. It would be a concrete illustration of the ANC's commitment to the principle of affirmative action and struggle against gender oppression.

After an intense six hour debate the issue was put to a vote. The majority of delegates (*who happen to be men!*) voted against the 30% proposal. The women delegates did not want to let the matter rest, indicating that they did not accept the vote. This position was however withdrawn "in the interest of unity", according to the statement read on behalf of the women delegates by the Women's League.

Some delegates argued that, even if the 30% proposal was not passed, the debate on the issue marked an important development in the history of the organisation. History would certainly have been made if the 30% proposal had been accepted. It would have put the ANC in a league of its own in the history of liberation movements. The sad truth is, however, that many such debates have taken place before, without fundamentally changing the position of women in organisations, let alone in society. ♦

on mass campaigns.

Conference recognised that the organisation is still relatively weak in the rural areas, as well as in Indian, coloured and white areas.

Delegates urged that a systematic programme be developed to recruit these communities into the ANC. Delegates observed that the ability of the ANC to lead all

sectors of the South African population will be a product of struggle and will be determined by its ability to take up issues affecting communities. "Passive recruitment will not ensure the organisation's growth," argued one delegate in the commission on building the ANC.

Delegates identified important aspects of a strategy for building the organisation:

- Door-to-door campaigns and involvement in peoples daily struggles;
- improving communication between leadership structures and basic organs such as branches and regions;
- improving the efficiency of all the structures;
- recognising and encouraging the creative capacity of the masses;
- paying special attention to rural areas;
- regular visits to regions and branches by the national leaders.

All these look very impressive and could go a long way in building the ANC. The test however, will be in the actual implementation. Bright ideas on their own do not build an organisation. Only hard work and time-consuming grassroots organising can do so.

No programme of action

In the past months the ANC has been criticised for lacking a comprehensive programme of action to

engage the regime in an all round offensive for the transfer of power to the people. While most of the resolutions adopted at conference reflect a fighting mood and have concrete ideas on how to continue the struggle, the fact that conference was unable to come up with a programme of action was its greatest weakness.

Conference gave the new NEC a mandate to develop such a programme as soon as possible. It will be essential that the NEC takes this up sooner rather than later. It will also be crucial for the NEC to involve other members of the tripartite alliance. This will ensure the harnessing of the collective strength of the entire alliance and will begin to overcome the problems of ineffectual functioning of the alliance identified by the conference. Unless a programme of action is drawn up, all the brilliant ideas around building organisation will come to nothing.

A policy conference

Conference did not deliberate on a number of draft policy documents prepared by the organisation's various departments. However, conference adopted the documents prepared by departments such as economic policy, constitutional and legal affairs, land commission, education, health, local government and science and

ANC and COSATU: a common strategic perspective

Over the past months COSATU trade unionists have been critical of the ANC leadership. Underlying this, however, is a broadly similar political perspective. On many issues the recent COSATU congress adopted positions similar to those adopted at the ANC conference. Both organisations:

- characterised negotiations as a terrain of struggle which should be linked to mass struggle and international pressure;
- resolved that negotiations should not be secret;
- resolved to tighten the tripartite alliance, improve consultation, and involve allies in the process of talks-about-talks;
- expressed the need to develop a programme of action;
- identified organisational and strategic weaknesses in the ANC, and the need to develop a programme of action;
- decided to push for an all-party congress, interim government and constituent assembly as the route to a democratic constitution;
- support the formation of a patriotic front;
- endorsed the current peace initiatives;
- called for a conference on sanctions;
- rejected proportional representation of women in their structures!

These positions, (except for the last one!) should serve as a basis for strengthening the tripartite alliance. ♦

(Karl von Holdt)

technology as guidelines for policy discussions in the organisations' structures. The conference charged the incoming NEC with convening a policy conference of mandated delegates within six months.

It is hoped that the conference will arrive at firm conclusions about what the organisation would do in various spheres if the ANC becomes the governing party in South Africa.

The new NEC

The newly elected NEC brings together the various

strands of the democratic movement. It blends together those from prison, the mass democratic movement and those from exile. Hopefully the newly elected leadership will overcome the inertia and criticisms of the past year. The challenge they face is to weave all these strands into an effective, accountable and collective leadership capable of taking the movement and South Africans into a future democratic society.

The key question still has to be answered: *will this be the last conference held under apartheid?* ☆