

# *'Time to implement changes and put people first...'*

*Labour Bulletin: Comrade Connie, how are you feeling about going to Parliament?*

*Connie:* We first have to see if I get into Parliament. There is not one feeling I feel mixed COSATU has been my organisation for almost 20 years. I've seen changes within it and it is something dear to me. So I'm not leaving gladly.

After the ANC executive meeting when the list was finalised, I went home and went straight to my room to grapple with the implications of what was happening. It is not a happy-go-lucky farewell at all!

*Labour Bulletin: What are you looking forward to in your new role?*

*Connie:* The next five years in Parliament will be critical. We must not have a repeat of the last five years, especially at the level of policy formation. There have been many important changes to the law. Now its time to implement the changes and to really put people first.

For example, the changes that were made to the child maintenance law need to be taken out to women so that they know what to do in order to sort out maintenance for their children. I've learnt from trade unionism that if a good agreement is not taken to the membership for implementation it will fail!

*Labour Bulletin: Do you have a particular area of interest, which you want to pursue in Parliament?*

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*Jane Barrett interviews Connie September, shopsteward at Rex Trueform and first vice-president of COSATU, on the eve of the election campaign and a certain move to Parliament.*

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*Connie:* There are two areas I would be equally happy to devote my time to: trade and industry, and women. Those of us who are going newly to Parliament from COSATU will hold discussions through the COSATU Parliamentary office about where to put our energies.

*Labour Bulletin: Is there room for improvement in the communication between MPs formerly in COSATU and COSATU structures?*

*Connie:* I think many comrades who went to Parliament in the last elections found themselves alienated from COSATU. There are many areas where contact could improve. For example the standing committee on agriculture could make contact with farmworkers. But it's not a question of making yet another layer of meetings. It's more a question of ensuring that the working class bias of the whole of the ANC is maintained and broadened. It's a question of exerting pressure on the

higher levels of ANC structures and eventually on the ANC caucus. A big mistake of the past five years has been that policy-making has started to move away from the constitutional structures.

Important decisions are being made by director generals and bureaucrats. We must go back to what we had in the past, where the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) structures were

strong. This is where the alliance comes in.. improved communication with COSATU structures is important, but those of us in Parliament will be first and foremost accountable to the ANC. It is critical that the ANC maintains a bias towards workers

*Labour Bulletin: In 1993 you said that the single biggest influence on your trade union life had been the Rex Trueform strike. What trade union experiences and lessons will you take with you to Parliament?*

**Connie:** Well, I'm contemplating writing a whole book on my experiences since I was elected as the first women national office bearer (NOB)!

The past six years have been wonderful. In 1993 we were still in the trenches at Rex Trueform and the need for transformation was obvious. Now the fundamentals of change in my workplace are in place. Four years ago an industry



plan was agreed on a tripartite basis, including an agreement that money should be set aside for skills training

There are still problems with implementation, with many employers pretending to deliver training and claiming money which just goes straight into the company's pockets. But in Rex Trueform we took them head-on and have successfully negotiated and implemented an Adult Basic Education (ABE) programme. We had ten students in training last year and now have 24 at a higher level. The classes take place during working hours at the plant, and three shopstewards have been trained to be tutors. A further two will be trained to teach in mother tongue. The thing is, you can't raise productivity when workers can't read and write.

So the ABE programme is critical for the industry and even more important for the individual. At the certificate ceremony in the factory all ten graduates gave their





own stories of when they left school and started work. They told how they had to lie when they applied for the job, and how they had to hide the fact that they couldn't read and write. Even management was weeping when they told their stories

The building blocks of workplace transformation are now in place, but there is a long way to go. With the LRA now in place, the task is to enable shopstewards to make the changes on the ground. They need to find the confidence to challenge so-called managerial prerogative. The 'workplace challenge' framework created by Nedlac won't work if we don't empower our shopstewards and officials

So this is where my interest in trade and industry comes from. I come from a very vulnerable sector. Garments and textiles are vulnerable locally, regionally and globally

The international arena is arguing

'competition' and I have seen the industry shrink from 200 000 union members in 1993 to 150 000 in 1999. People are talking about uplifting the service sector, but what about turning manufacturing around? We should be talking about quality textiles and leather and garments And the same for other manufacturing sectors

*Labour Bulletin: Tell me about your daughter, who was in her mid-teens when you took on being an office bearer for COSATU.*

*Comle: My daughter is now almost 21, and in her second year at college. We went through some difficult times, with me being away from home such a lot. But we can now both sit and reflect without exchanging accusations.*

That period had its pain and I missed a lot of time with her. I can't turn the clock back but can only encourage other people

to be careful and to spend valuable time with their children, especially in their adolescence.

The MDM must understand that we have human beings in our ranks and we all need to learn to balance the needs of relationships and parenthood with our political responsibilities. The ANC was progressive in putting 33% women in Parliament, but there is still insufficient recognition of the stumbling blocks to real participation.

Organisations must not only ask women to participate - they must break down the barriers to make it possible for women to participate.

*Labour Bulletin: What is your message to COSATU women?*

**Connie:** COSATU can never be accused of not changing the lives of women workers. Collective bargaining power has been used effectively, including getting certain clauses into the BCEA. However, we still need to sort out women's representation in our structures.

In 1993 I was elected as the first woman office bearer of COSATU. But why aren't we now saying it would be good to have two? In the regional structures we still elect women office bearers as treasurers. The argument seems to be that she always works with the purse at home so we'll try her on this first and then see how she does.

This must change. We're also not doing very well at the national level within affiliates, although there have been some changes. NEHAWU, SACTWU and SACCAWU all have women office bearers. But where are the women in SADTU, and other unions with a large women membership?

At the last COSATU congress we decided on a targeted approach to the

election of women leaders. It's a pity we lost the quota argument, but agreement on setting targets was still important. Unions with large numbers of women must elect women. They must be bold. COSATU's gender structure needs to monitor progress and enable the constitutional structures of unions to put the target into practice.

My main message to my women comrades is this: Don't say we are marginalised and complain about needing extra training and so on. Go out and use the COSATU constitution and decisions, the labour laws and the constitution of the country, to make things happen. Use the tools we have created for ourselves. Also, recognise that things have moved in the past ten years.

There is no more howling and whistling when women stand up to speak at a congress. The task is how to take things further. People think it's a scary place to be an office bearer. But it's not scary if there is a constitution to guide you and mechanisms of support in place. I must be bold enough to admit that at times I experienced some personally hurtful accusations from other women.

The point is if you only put one woman into an office bearers committee of six, patriarchy will continue.

I hope I have helped set the pace and that COSATU women will not turn back. My fellow office bearers set the pace giving me a broad range of responsibilities, ranging from Nedlac to the ILO. These were not favours but tasks demanded by the organisation. I hope the incoming office bearers, men and women, recognise the importance of working like this. ★

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