

Unity in COSATU

by KARL VON HOLDT

"I don't like the way we are debating this point, comrades," said a shopsteward at the Wits regional congress of COSATU. "One group puts forward their position, and then simply repeats it every time they speak. The other group simply smashes the first and then puts forward its own position. There is no movement, and we do not listen to each other. We must listen to the other views and then criticise those views constructively. We must test our positions by debating, with the aim of coming to an agreement that one position is best. Otherwise we will never find unity."

The shopsteward was speaking at a regional congress late last year. He spoke with great passion and seriousness at a point when the debate was becoming heated. After his words the spirit of the debate was more comradely. This is a small incident, but it is a sign of the increasing maturity and unity within the federation.

Harry Gwala, former Robben Island prisoner and activist in the SACP, the ANC and SACTU, was guest speaker at both the NUM congress and the NUMSA congress. He addressed the former on behalf of NUM's honorary president, Nelson Mandela. And at the NUMSA congress Gwala himself was elected

honorary president of the union. At a symbolic level, this is also a sign of increasing unity in COSATU.

Even more important, there is a growing consensus within COSATU on the key issues facing the mass democratic movement (MDM). There are of course differences too, but now the possibility exists for debating these and resolving them within a common perspective.

The interviews with Motlatsi and Mayekiso show this common perspective very clearly. Judging from what they say, from the congress resolutions, and from keynote speeches by COSATU and UDF speakers, the following are seen as the key issues



Delegates at the NUMSA 1989 congress

Photo: Labour Bulletin

facing the MDM:

- rebuilding and strengthening the MDM itself;
- increasing co-operation between COSATU, NACTU and other unions, particularly around the Labour Relations Act (LRA);
- building a broad anti-apartheid alliance;
- campaigning against state repression;
- clarifying the strategy of the MDM on possible negotiations;
- initiating discussion on the constitutional guidelines of the ANC;
- supporting the struggle of SWAPO and NUNW for genuine independence of Namibia.

This list of issues shows a concern with defending and rebuilding, as well as a confidence that there are several fronts on which the mass movement can take the initiative and keep the state on the retreat.

Anti-apartheid alliance

One of the most controversial issues in the past has been the idea of a broad anti-apartheid alliance. The NUM congress resolved that COSATU and UDF should form the core of an anti-apartheid coalition. Some observers have interpreted the resolution adopted at the NUMSA congress as rejecting a broad alliance in favour of a narrower working class alliance (*Business Day*, 26.5.89).

However, in a six page introduction to the resolutions NUMSA states that, "Political actions which isolate [the apartheid] state are an essential and necessary task in which NUMSA must play an active role." It goes on to say that while "Capitalist organisations can play no part in building the organisations of the working class," "in certain circumstances elements of capital may play a part in removing apartheid. Through political analysis, open debate and democratic decision-making, we shall decide how to combine with other organisations."

The general secretary of the union makes it clear in the interview with *Labour Bulletin* that NUMSA sees a broad alliance as necessary for ending apartheid. He stresses - as does the president of NUM - the difference between that broad alliance and the

tighter alliance of mass-based and predominantly working class organisations, the MDM. There would seem then to be common ground between NUM and NUMSA on this issue.

There may well be debate over how broad the alliance should go. This was hotly debated around the convening of the Anti-apartheid Conference last year. The NUMSA resolutions seem to caution against broadening the alliance too far. But the NUM resolution on this issue, while it does not specify who should be part of the coalition, also implies that there should be limits by referring to "the relevant progressive forces that have been to Lusaka".

Could this anti-apartheid coalition include the Democratic Party? Motlati mentions Wynand Malan, and important sections of the DP have been to Lusaka. But if the DP puts candidates up for the coloured and Indian constituencies in the general election there will probably be no chance of an alliance.

Charters and constitutional guidelines

ACTWUSA, at its recent Special National Congress, resolved to initiate discussion in COSATU about a workers' charter. In the past a workers' charter has been seen as an alternative to the Freedom Charter, and there has been heated debate and division over the idea.

Some observers have seen the ACTWUSA resolution as a sign of fresh division in COSATU. *Business*

Day went so far as to argue that, "A COSATU union's attitude to the drafting of a 'Workers' Charter' has become a critical symbolic indication of where it stands in the debate" about socialism and alliances. It also adds that supporters of the workers' charter include NUMSA.

Mayekiso rejects this, and draws a distinction between a workers' charter and a working class political programme (which is called for in the NUMSA resolution). Mayekiso argues that a workers charter would cover issues directly facing workers, rather than "broad political questions," and implies that such a document would be useful.

An examination of the ACTWUSA resolution shows that their view seems to be similar to Mayekiso's. The resolution calls for drafting a charter which will guarantee the right to organise, to strike, to negotiate, and so on. ACTWUSA also resolves that such a charter should give workers the right to sit on management boards of private and state-owned companies, and to participate in management decisions. In state-owned enterprises 'workers control' will be developed.

This resolution does not in itself call for a socialist society or a capitalist society. It talks only about workers' rights at the workplace. If a post-apartheid government initiates a widescale programme of nationalisation under working class leadership, then the workers' charter would be part of a process of building socialism. It is interesting to compare ACTWUSA's resolution with wor-



NUM's James Motlatsi

Photo: NUM

kers' rights in communist China. (see article in this issue.)

If, however, a post-apartheid government were to limit itself to establishing a social democracy, then the charter envisaged by ACTWUSA would point to some kind of participation in capitalism similar to the West German system of co-determination.

ACTWUSA's resolution says nothing about these "broad political questions" and so it cannot be "socialist" compared to the Freedom Charter. ACTWUSA clearly states that it is not an alternative to the Freedom Charter, but an elaboration of workers' rights.

Rather than being a factor of division as *Business Day* suggests, the workers' charter as put forward by ACTWUSA could be a valuable factor of unity. ACTWUSA points out that a workers' charter is referred to in the constitutional guidelines of the

ANC. The union believes that the constitutional guidelines are more unifying than the Freedom Charter, because they call for broad debate (although the guidelines themselves say that the Freedom Charter should be part of a future constitution).

Since almost all organisations in the MDM are calling for mass discussion of the guidelines, and since for unions the issue of workers' rights after liberation is especially important; since the guidelines themselves refer to a workers' charter, and as pointed out in *Labour Bulletin* 14.1 the SACP has also endorsed the idea of a workers charter along the lines suggested by ACTWUSA, it is difficult to imagine any union in COSATU opposing the idea.

Shaping the future

Clearly unions are emphasising the need to discuss concretely the shape of a future society. The NUM congress resolved to start "an intensive debate in all structures of the union... leading to a clear blueprint on how the mining industry should be run." This resolution is even more detailed than the workers' charter: "the blue print must deal with mineral production, new technology, miners' housing, the future of the industry, health and safety, wages, control of the industry by workers, labour requirements of the industry, development of new mines, development of finished products from mined minerals."

The apartheid state has shown it-

UNIONS AND POLITICS

self incapable of rescuing South Africa from chronic political and economic crisis. The MDM continues to broaden its support and find new ways of resisting. Local and international forces have begun to place a negotiated settlement on the agenda. These developments are forcing unions and mass organisations to think more seriously about how transfer of power to the majority will be achieved. These developments have also revealed the range and complexity of forces struggling for influence in South Africa, and the enormous difficulties facing any transition to socialism.

There is an increasingly coherent common perspective on these issues. Abstract debates about socialism versus national democracy have given way to concrete discussions about transition to a democratic society in which the needs and aspirations of the masses can be met. This in itself is having a unifying effect.

Rebuilding the mass democratic movement

NUMSA's resolution deals in some detail with the need to rebuild the MDM in the communities. The resolution states that: "The organisations of the mass democratic movement have been effectively smashed by the emergency repression throughout most parts of South Africa, and consequently there are no clearly defined structures with mass support in our communities with which we could forge a disciplined united front al-



ACTWUSA president Amon Ntuli

Photo: ACTWUSA Worker News

liance." It calls for COSATU and its allies to build centralised structures based on street, area, town, region and national committees.

The NUM resolution on repression also notes that "due to a lack of structures, unity and/or consolidation, we have been unable to resist... brutal repression," and calls on progressive organisations to form street, block and shaft committees. However, it does not propose a specific way of doing this. Motlatsi also stresses the survival and continuity of organisation and resistance, rather than their destruction.

The NUMSA resolution seems to imply replacing the current structures in the community with new ones (see *New Nation*, 20.5.89). But Mayekiso explains that NUMSA is arguing for a restructuring of UDF affiliates to form centralised, national organisations in the student, youth, women's, civic and other sectors.

This view is likely to find widespread support. The UDF itself had decided to move in this direction in

1987, but was seriously hampered by the emergency repression. Despite this, SAYCO was launched as a national youth organisation in 1987 - only to be restricted in February 1988.

This points to the limitation of the NUMSA resolution: national organisation in the community has been repeatedly banned by the state. COSAS was banned in 1985, and regional student structures were restricted during 1988. SANSCO and SAYCO were restricted, together with UDF, at the beginning of 1988. The question this poses is - how to build national structures under the state of emergency? The model of trade unions does not help very much, because unlike community organisations unions have the open legal space to operate.

All in all, though, it is clear that unions are doing a lot of hard thinking on these questions, and there is a wealth of different perspectives and ideas. Debate on this area should be fruitful.

Are there differences?

I have stressed the common ground emerging within COSATU for two reasons. Firstly, it has been the major trend since last years' Special National Congress. Secondly, it is extremely significant because it is enabling the federation to act in a unified manner.

This trend within COSATU is part of a broader process of unification of forces opposed to apartheid. COSATU is working more closely

with UDF affiliates; COSATU and NACTU are co-operating, especially on the LRA; and building a broad anti-apartheid alliance seems to be firmly on the agenda.

Within this common ground, however, there are still different emphases. NUMSA stresses the weakness of organisation in the community, and the difficulty of building links because of this. NUM stresses the survival and adaptability of community organisation and struggle, while also recognising the need to rebuild. NUMSA appears more cautious about how broad the anti-apartheid alliance should go; NUM resolves to send a union delegation to the governments of West Germany, England and the US, to present them with a full set of apartheid laws and demand that they isolate the apartheid regime. NUMSA emphasises the question of socialism and class; NUM emphasises the Freedom Charter, resolving that it "must remain our guideline in the struggle for political and economic liberation".

Economic crisis and political crisis

Underlying these different emphases is a different approach to analysing the current situation in South Africa. Within NUMSA there is a stress on the economic dimensions of the crisis. The carefully argued "Introduction to Congress Resolutions" analyses the "accumulation crisis" of South African capitalism, which "restricts the extent of social and

economic reforms and ensures that reforms and repression will have to continue side by side."

The "Introduction" goes on to argue that the apartheid state and capital are developing policies and strategies which will weaken the working class by dividing it. This is the 30%/70% society. 30% of the oppressed people, including a privileged layer of the working class, will have access to high wages, skilled jobs, education, housing and amenities, pensions, medical aid etc. The other 70% will be condemned to bad jobs, jobs in deregulated or informal sectors, or no jobs at all; to living in shacks or bushes; they will have little access to education, skills, health care or social amenities (see Alec Erwin, "Towards a planned economy", in *SALB* 14.1).

Thus, in NUMSA's analysis, the central issue facing the working class is of unifying and organising its different groupings - "whether it is employed or unemployed, in factories, small businesses or hawkers, young or old, man or woman, skilled or unskilled, urban or rural, white or black."

This analysis is not only NUMSA's. It is based on the extremely important economic trends project which was commissioned by COSATU and influences the thinking of all its affiliates. NUMSA, however, has gone further in trying to deal with these problems than other unions. It is setting the pace in trying to develop strategies for negotiating benefits such as housing, pensions and medical aid in a way that does not deepen divisions in the working class.

This perspective is critically important. If the trade unions and community organisations cannot unify the working class and overcome the material divisions fostered by the state and capital, the struggle for liberation will be weakened and post-liberation reconstruction will be more difficult.

On the other hand, unions such as NUM place more emphasis on the political dimensions of South Africa's crisis. They stress the need to unify all sections and classes of the oppressed. They refer to splits in the ruling bloc, tensions and divisions in the Nationalist Party, the need to isolate apartheid nationally and internationally, and to build the ideological and political hegemony of the MDM as the only force capable of solving South Africa's problems. In short, they stress what may be called the national question.

This perspective is also vitally important. Apartheid cannot be uprooted from South Africa without political and ideological strategies and campaigns which unify the oppressed, divide the ruling bloc and isolate apartheid.

It is these different approaches that underlie the different emphases within COSATU. However, they are different emphases, not antagonistic positions. NUMSA recognises the significance of the political crisis of apartheid, and NUM recognises the importance of building and unifying the working class around a socialist perspective. Thus differences are likely to strengthen and complement each other, rather than create divisions. ☆