

Photo: Abdul Shariff



# National general strike

*“It’s more than VAT, it’s the entire economy”*

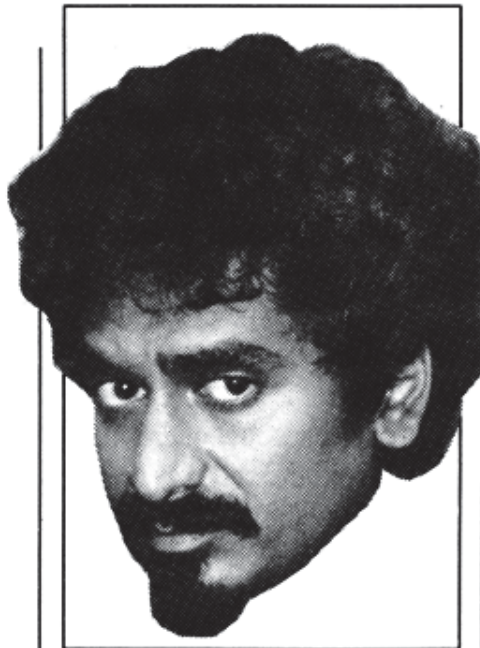
COSATU General Secretary JAY NAIDOO speaks to the *Labour Bulletin*.

**Bulletin:** *What is the central focus of the anti-VAT campaign?*

**Naidoo:** There are two central focuses. One is that there should be no taxation without representation. That is the political thrust. The other is that VAT has a very severe economic impact on our members. The success of the VAT campaign is that it has successfully woven these into each other.

Politically, the campaign has clarified that we cannot accept that the government is legitimate and has the right to govern. We have won that struggle. There is no question of this government’s legitimacy any more, even in the media, because it represents a white minority. We have broken the arguments that the government is a sovereign government.

The VAT campaign is also



a demand for a macro-economic negotiating forum. We intend to drive the government and business into two focuses of negotiations, one socio-economic and the other political.

**Bulletin:** *What impact has the campaign had on the negotiation process and on the relative passivity of the*

*masses over the recent period?*

**Naidoo:** It has given the masses of our people new confidence. Our people have been on the receiving end for a long time - on the receiving end of economic restructuring, and of violence. That has been very demoralising. People don’t come to meetings, they are scared of wearing T-shirts. But now there is a resurgence of confidence that our action can shape the future. There has been a resurgence of mass action – only today 10 000 cleaning workers were marching past our offices demanding an industrial council! – and this has given confidence to our leadership that, yes, we can have an impact on the situation.

The VAT campaign is serving as a vehicle to



channel people's energies, to challenge the government. VAT has ignited the mass component of the struggle for democracy.

It has developed a coalition that has propelled into mass action people and organisations that are not used to this. You have doctors, social workers, the moderate unions, black businessmen, getting up in meetings and saying we have to take action, we have to stop this government. The medical profession is particularly outraged. We have just heard that there have been mass resignations from MASA [the Medical Association of South Africa] in the Eastern Cape, because it is not coming out forcefully enough against VAT. Constituencies that were previously passive onlookers in the struggle between ourselves and the apartheid regime are now choosing sides and taking action. There is a wide consensus that the problem is the government.

We are redefining the agenda of change in this transition period. The campaign is establishing firstly, that the masses do have a role to play in transition, and secondly, that negotiations have to deal with economic as well as political issues.

Our starting point is that it is civil society that has driven the government into crisis, and forced it to opt for negotiations. This is the mass component of our struggle. Civil society will have a

huge impact on transition and on the future democratic South Africa.

The National Party can see this very clearly. Their strategy is to marginalise civil society and deal only with the political parties through the forum of the All-Party Congress. If we allow that, we allow De Klerk to set the agenda. They are surrounded by political parties which they have created, to add weight to their side. It will exclude out strength, which is based in civil society. Our engine for intervening in negotiation and transition is both the political organisations and the organisations of civil society.

**Bulletin: *What then are COSATU's views on the links between the economic and political negotiations?***

**Naidoo:** The political negotiations take place through the All-Party Conference, the interim government and the constituent assembly. That must not preclude us from addressing the economic issues.

This is a debate in the ranks of the democratic movement. Some believe we are confusing ourselves by entering into a proliferation of negotiations around economic issues that delay the political negotiations. We have a contrary view in COSATU. We believe that political negotiations will actually mean very little to our people unless we deliver very concrete goods to them.

That is the connection that

our side is missing. We will blunder if we think that the process of transition focuses just on political power. If you go to Phola Park, you can't talk about a vote, you have to talk about housing. This is how you win their support.

We need broader macro-economic negotiations to identify the national framework within which we are going to try to resolve economic problems in this country. In that framework, we need to set up a number of working forums, on housing, education, health, technology, investment policy, industrial restructuring, and bring on board constituencies that represent the people there. In that way, we will be able to bring about a fundamental transformation of our society at the economic level.

Economic restructuring is preceding apace in all things - Eskom, the Post Office, the railways, steel plants, financial systems, etc. If we allow this to continue without intervening, the government will deliver some houses or better education to the more privileged elite, and then take the credit. They will engage us in consultation processes as they did with the education working group, which actually lead nowhere. The government appears to be consulting, but unilaterally introduces things that will entrench its position in a post-apartheid South Africa.

We need to block the aspects of government



policies that are going to entrench things and make it impossible for a democratic government to meet the needs of people and address the inequalities of apartheid.

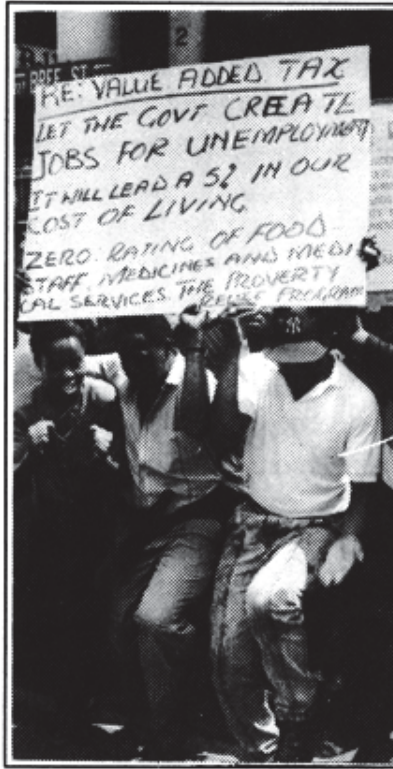
It is critical in this period that we challenge the government for control over the process of transition on all fronts. We need to drive it into central negotiations on political and economic issues, which are linked but independent of each other. So that accompanying the political process, people see that we are delivering on education, housing, health, and change in the factories.

In the democratic movement we need to define a clear negotiating strategy. How do negotiations assist us to deliver the goods? How does it help us in building organisation? How does it raise the consciousness of workers?

**Bulletin:** *De Klerk has accused you of using the VAT campaign to gain an interim government by stealth. Is this true?*

**Naidoo:** Our response was that we are not seeking it by stealth – we are coming openly, through the front door. It is a legitimate, democratic demand.

For us the interim government is not just a slogan. What is important is the content. Negotiations should reflect the positions taken by all major players. Any changes, at any level, have to be negotiated with



*Campaigning for macro-economic negotiations*

*Photo: Abdul Shariff*

the major players.

We do not see trade unions being part of an interim government. But we see negotiations as I have described them as the process on which the interim government is based. And certainly we see ourselves as playing an important role in this process of negotiations, both at an economic and at a political level.

**Bulletin:** *Are you saying that the interim government should have more than a simple administrative function and joint control of the security forces, the radio and TV?*

**Naidoo:** I think that is an important element. We should look at those aspects of government in which we want

to have some sort of joint control and monitoring, particularly in relation to the violence and the public media. But the interim government cannot rule by decree. We will not accept any interim government that rules by decree, even one that is a government of our own complexion.

In South Africa we have enormous problems to overcome. There are high expectations amongst our people. Unless we create a process that legitimises the transition and draws people in and makes the process their own process, they are not going to accept the leadership we offer them. They know that we cannot solve these problems overnight, but they need to have confidence in the process. It is useless to have a very powerful interim government that has no constituency and does not build the power of the people on the ground to take control of their lives. Therefore rule by decree is out.

**Bulletin:** *What impact has the campaign had on the labour movement?*

**Naidoo:** Labour has led this campaign, and COSATU has been one of the leading organisations. It has had a tremendous value in uniting workers across the political spectrum. We have developed a close working relation with NACTU, closer than it has ever been, as well as with independent unions. It is also an issue that has brought on



board the established unions, representing whites, staff associations, white collar workers, organisations like FEDSAL [Federation of Salaried Staff Associations] and the Public Servants Association.

These unions attended the labour summits where a general strike was discussed in principle. They said they would not endorse the strike because it is against their constitutions. They did not attend the union summit where we actually set the dates for the stayaway.

They do however agree with our demands on VAT.

With FEDSAL and the Public Service Associations we have reached an understanding that they are not going to attack the stayaway. The understanding is that they are not going to stand against it.

Our information is that white workers say that during the strike they will not do the work that is done by black workers, saying this is their issue as well. Even the rightwing white Confederation of Metal and Building Unions supports some of our demands. We extend our hands to them, and hope for co-operation in future. We are extending a very special appeal to white workers.

The campaign has laid the basis for building a very broad trade union unity around other issues, specifically union issues - issues like economic restructuring, job security, retrenchment. We built our

own organisations around economic issues, and that is how we can build a broader unity.

**Bulletin:** *What is the political significance of the coalition built around the campaign?*

**Naidoo:** The campaign has demonstrated the ability of the democratic movement to lead a broad coalition of people, including people who do not agree with our policy. The coalition includes small business, even white business, across the board to the PAC, AZAPO, consumer and welfare bodies. We were successful because of the way in which the issue was taken up. The people felt that this is their process and their negotiation.

That is why the coalition still runs, despite the fact that the trade union sector is launching a national strike. Previously a strike would have completely upset a coalition like this. We have broad support from the coalition for the national strike. By being part of the negotiation process and part of the process of reporting back, people are beginning to understand why we need to put pressure on the government, why the general strike has to take place.

**Bulletin:** *How does this affect the position of government?*

**Naidoo:** The breadth of the coalition has an impact on De Klerk. It legitimises the

demand for an interim government in the minds of ordinary people, black and white. White old age pensioners are up in arms on VAT. Municipalities in white areas are up in arms on VAT on water and electricity. It is now plain to see that De Klerk's constituency is the more affluent classes.

This government has absolutely no right, being unrepresentative, unilaterally to do anything in this country. We have been attacked for saying that previously. Now business is saying that ours is a logical view.

The alternative is to ignore public opinion and to ignore pressure of organised constituencies. This will lead to increased conflict and confrontation which will not be solved by the All-Party Congress or any political solution.

**Bulletin:** *What have been the responses of business on these issues?*

**Naidoo:** Organised business has seen that we are serious about the issue. Previously they were totally behind the way VAT was imposed. Now there is a significant difference of opinion amongst them.

Clearly one section of big business wants to smash us, using Thatcherite language. There is another significant section of business that sees that they have got to negotiate and reach an agreement that is binding, an



agreement that will create a national framework within which economic restructuring will take place.

That is the view which is gaining ground because they accept that they cannot destroy COSATU. The disruption to the economy would be too enormous.

**Bulletin:** *Politically, do you think that the democratic movement is now gaining the initiative?*

**Naidoo:** The initiative will be temporary, unless we go into it with a very concrete strategy, with a clear programme. Unless we do that, the gains will be very easily reversed. Already the government is accusing the democratic movement of following a double agenda, of being a revolutionary movement while at the same time wanting to negotiate.

We in the trade unions are very clear about the need for the alliance to develop a concrete strategy at the economic and political level. We need to run these processes simultaneously, and link that to delivering goods and building organisation amongst our people, as well as building the broader coalition. That coalition cannot be built just through events such as the Patriotic Front Conference or the All-Party Congress. It is going to be built through involving people in struggle on issues that really affect them. Such coalitions last much longer than coalitions established in conferences.

**Bulletin:** *Has COSATU consulted the people adequately on the question of the coming strike?*

**Naidoo:** There has been more mobilisation and discussion around this general strike than there has been on any other industrial action that we have taken, and therefore we are confident that the action will be very powerful. Inkatha-gate and the issue of taxation without representation came up at the Congress. Following the Congress resolution there was a Central Executive Committee meeting and mass mobilisation in industrial and regional areas.

**Bulletin:** *With violence going on unabated, what arrangements have COSATU and NACTU made for securing the lives of the workers on the day of the strike?*

**Naidoo:** There are rallies and marches planned for the day of the strike and demonstrations. Obviously, the violence is a key concern to us. That is why we have allowed time to make proper arrangements for the strike.

We are presently setting up monitoring mechanisms on the ground. We are setting up a central monitoring centre. We plan to use mechanisms of the Peace Accord and the dispute resolution mechanisms. We have also appealed to the security forces that there should be speedy action

against agents provocateurs.

Obviously there are forces which are going to try and discredit the strike through stirring up violence. We have issued guidelines on mass action. And the media, especially the black media, is playing an important role.

**Bulletin:** *This campaign has been led by labour and particularly COSATU, and some people are saying that COSATU is usurping the role of the ANC. Is this so?*

**Naidoo:** The ANC is in the co-ordinating committee. But I think the issues of economic negotiations were of more central concern to COSATU. Because the ANC is a political organisation, its focus has been primarily around political issues and political transition.

For us VAT provided the opportunity to place economic issues centrally on the agenda. Macro-economic negotiations are now on the agenda and no one can get away from that.

The campaign could strengthen the alliance enormously and strengthen the movement for democracy in this country. It could create in reality a very powerful coalition around issues of how to achieve democracy in this country. It is not that we are trying to usurp the position of the ANC.

COSATU has always been a political player and intends remaining a political player even if we have an ANC government in power. ☆