

We are strong, we are mobilising

Bulletin: What is COSATU's membership and how has it changed?

Ntshalintshali: Nineteen unions are affiliated to COSATU and we have over 1,8 million members. COSATU membership has been rising steadily – in 1991 we had 1 258 853 members compared to the 1 805 054 we have today. We have seen large increases in membership in the public sector unions. For example, NEHAWU had 18 110 members in 1991 and it now has 234 607. SAMWU had 60 304 members in 1991 and it now has 119 792. Manufacturing unions have been under pressure from retrenchments. SACTWU lost 65 810 members from 1991 to today and NUMSA lost 73 241 in the same time period. The largest affiliates are NUM with 290 070 members, NEHAWU with 234 607, SADTU with 218 747 and NUMSA with 200 000.

Bulletin: COSATU has run recruitment campaigns in the past and congress this year resolved to run an annual recruitment campaign. While the Autumn offence was regarded as successful in recruiting over 50 000 new members, the September campaign in 1999 was regarded 'as a disaster'. What lessons have you learned from past campaigns?

Ntshalintshali: A few important issues pertain to 1999. The first is that we did not

*Tanya van Meelis interviews
Bheki Ntshalintshali,
COSATU's deputy general
secretary*

devote a lot in preparation for the campaign because we were putting energy into the general election. People also thought that because the first recruitment campaign was so successful they would get the same enthusiasm again. But unions had failed to follow up after the Autumn offensive – workers who had been recruited were then not exposed to the union and serviced. This left workers open to victimisation from management. Workers were therefore not so keen to rejoin the same unions in 1999.

The Autumn campaign was also very high profile. When it was launched it was the first of its kind as then deputy president Mbeki, COSATU national office bearers and national leadership of affiliates were there. People joined because they saw joining as part of a political alliance.

Planning was poor as there was a lack of time and a lack of resources for the 1999 campaign. However, we still achieved a lot – we recruited 20 000 workers in four weeks. It's only when we compare that amount to the 50 000 recruited in 1998, that we can say performance was poor.

Bulletin: *What does COSATU offer members?*

Ntsballintsbalk: We offer three main things to members. Firstly, we engage on socioeconomic issues to improve their living standards. We do this through co-ordinating affiliates through the living wage campaign. COSATU also protects workers at work and fights for their job security.

We have massive campaigns such as the jobs campaign and our focus on changing the LRA to make it more difficult for employers to retrench. Workers are offered legal protection through the COSATU engagement on the law formulation. They also benefit from the legal advice given to COSATU by our lawyers. The third area where workers benefit is through education and advancing their knowledge on how to tackle daily issues in the workplace such as negotiations and arbitration. They also receive political education, which is as important. They gain skills through our involvement with other organisations such as Ditsela, which we tap into to train our members.

Bulletin: *How is COSATU staffed?*

Ntsballintsbalk: We employ a total of 63 people. We have nine different units – the secretariat department, administration, the education unit, the organising unit, the policy co-ordinating unit, the parliamentary office, the international unit, the publicity and information unit, the finance unit and the eight regions. We have been restructuring based on the knowledge that we wanted to translate victories in parliament, Nedlac etc into practice and the need to build capacity. We increased staffing in the secretariat to help ensure that we could monitor how

decisions were being carried out and developments in key forums. We also established a policy co-ordinating unit to manage COSATU's engagement in key forums and institutions.

We are also examining skills development and performance appraisal systems to ensure that we retain staff and define career paths.

Bulletin: *COSATU has, by its own admission, still to undertake considerable work to improve the strength of women leaders in the labour movement. What has hampered progress in this regard?*

Ntsballintsbalk: Unions are not putting enough resources and commitment to advancing our policies on gender – they are not doing enough to sensitise male comrades and the like. The federation has failed to come up with a strategy that all affiliates can adopt – for example the quota debate. COSATU's work has been hampered because we have been without a gender co-ordinator since the promotion of Rose Makwane to administrative secretary. This will change now because we have recently appointed a gender co-ordinator. We now have a gender policy that was developed in the gender conference and adopted at our last congress. We now need to put in place strategies and tactics to ensure we implement the policies. We are hoping to get commitment from affiliates and gender co-ordinators and make progress in the next three years.

Bulletin: *Many unions have identified problems regarding their relationship to their investment company. COSATU has also noted problems in this regard, including problems around accountability and where the investment*



COSATU deputy general secretary, Bheki Ntshalintshali.

companies are investing. Can you comment on the problems and identify what you will be doing to address them.

Ntshalintshali: We had taken resolutions that the investment companies must meet the needs of members. But in the functioning of the investment companies there has been a loose arrangement – chief executive officers (CEO) divorced the running of the companies from the federation's objectives. CEOs wanted to maximise profits and often competed on tenders where tenders resulted in destroying jobs.

We now say that we must work closely with the CEO and as a result have mandated our retirement funds co-ordinator to co-ordinate the investment council where all union investment companies sit. We must show them where they went wrong, give them a new mandate and monitor them closely.

Bulletin: What are COSATU's strengths and weaknesses?

Ntshalintshali: Our strength is that we are able to attract members. We are also attracting new members that you would not find in the unions in older times – for example footballers, workers in the performing arts and increasingly white and white-collar workers. These are new kinds of workers who are attracted to COSATU and are coming to us without our going to them. We also got another three independent unions coming to join us on their own initiative. This shows us that we are able to accommodate and attract a wide range of workers who see us as their home. We are moving in the direction of one federation one industry.

We are also strong on policy formulation. Our parliamentary office has done a lot of excellent work and has put forward many submissions on a range of



'We will take forward gender issues...'

issues. We have also intervened in Nedlac. We have advanced workers' benefits and fared fairly well in bargaining councils.

Our weakness is transforming gains that we have made from Nedlac and parliament into practical gains. For example, while the legislation promotes centralised bargaining, many sectors are not in centralised bargaining. We have established a policy desk - its intention is to bridge the gap between policy formulation and implementation.

Another weakness is the poaching of membership that still takes place between unions because of a lack of clear demarcation. We took resolutions regarding handing over membership in our 1996 congress but the resolutions have not been implemented. Some

sensitive unions are shrinking in membership and don't want to hand members over to other unions. Sometimes, members don't want to move to another union either. We see establishing cartels as the answer - unions will merge and thus not lose members. For example, CWIU and PPWAWU merged to form CEPPWAWU. CAWU has integrated to NUM.

Another weakness we must address is taking forward gender issues in a manner that will make a big difference by our next congress.

Bulletin: What is your assessment of the congress you held in September?

Ntsballintshali: We held vigorous and honest debate and did not shy away for the difficult issues such as the workings of the alliance. We

were able to discuss the issues openly. We were also pleased with the media coverage we got weeks before the congress, the live coverage during the congress and the coverage we got after the congress. It showed that people still believe that COSATU is still a force to be reckoned with.

We discussed resolutions well and now are faced with the task of developing programmes - for example, we need to develop a programme in the alliance. We still need to keep debating and challenging ourselves on key issues such as - what's our role in the National Democratic Revolution? How will we engage strategically in Nedlac, the President's Working Group and the Millennium Labour Council?

What came out clearly was the need for us to deal with job losses, racism and corruption. We came out with clear resolutions on these issues. We need to develop a strategy to implement them.

The congress also marked a vast improvement from the past – people did not just debate for the sake of debating. Good preparation before the congress (through affiliates having their own congresses and circulation, in time, of the COSATU political discussion paper) made people aware of the issues – people focused on the issues and not the wording.

Bulletin: What campaigns will you be prioritising for 2001?

Ntsbalintsbali: We'll be vigorously pursuing a number of areas. We will again have our recruitment campaign and we will be taking up violence against women, HIV/AIDS, building of stronger union, cartels etc. It's also our 15-year anniversary and we will be celebrating it. We will focus on job losses and the sector job summits. Part of our campaign against job loss and for job creation will involve continuing to challenge the law – specifically section 189 on retrenchments and the insolvency laws.

We will also challenge government on reducing tariffs more quickly than required by the WTO. We are mobilising for a general strike on the labour law review specifically relating to retrenchments, Sunday premium, and the extension of centralised bargaining agreements. We'll mobilise our full force for a three-day strike unless government compromises. The strike will take place on 28-30 March 2001.

Bulletin: What is your message to government?

Ntsbalintsbali: Implement the RDP as you agreed in 1999. Government should be open and transparent and engage us on different issues – we should discuss and engage on issues and government should implement what was agreed. Government should realise that if certain policies fail, it should change those policies. It should not be married to policy. Government should also implement the jobs summit resolutions because we are facing a jobs crisis. It should also realise that it must address HIV/AIDS and not take a political stance on it. We need more discussion in the alliance where we can discuss issues and isolate the problems. There are definitely solutions to the problems – we just have to crack our heads together to find them.

Bulletin: What is your message to business?

Ntsbalintsbali: Labour's agenda is open. We are hoping to come up with positive solutions in the Millennium Labour Council. However, we need you to develop trust and the will to address problems. Unemployment and job creation are areas which business has the ability to address adequately. In our engagement, business should consider labour as a partner in addressing labour concerns around the labour law review.

Bulletin: What is your message to members?

Ntsbalintsbali: Participate in decision-making – give mandates and receive report-backs. You can only do that if you participate in the federation's structures. Check that your leaders are following your mandates and follow developments. Your leaders are supposed to speak on your behalf and you need to influence them to help them do so. ★

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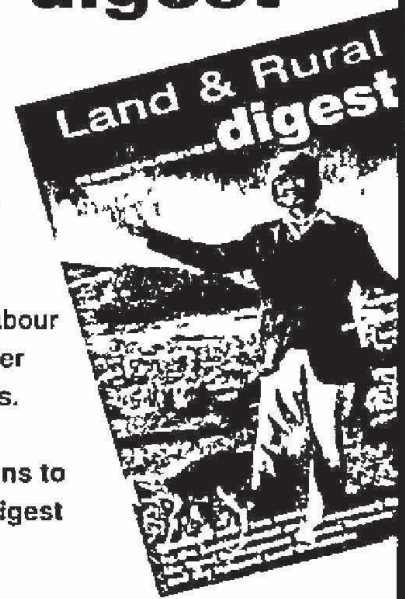
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