

What happens when the blanket comes off?

Many who attended Cosatu's 8th national congress in September 2003 believed it was inevitable (in view of the upcoming elections) that it would be dominated by ANC politics. The **Labour Bulletin** spoke to officials in a number of affiliates to get their views on the congress.

The atmosphere at Cosatu's 8th national congress was decidedly different to the previous congress in 2000 which was characterised by high levels of antagonism against the ANC-led government. This time around anti-Gear songs and slogans were absent and instead the focus turned to songs in support of deputy president Jacob Zuma. In the aftermath of the congress, questions have been raised as to the reasons behind support of Zuma. Some unionists argue that the Cosatu leadership might have subtly laid the groundwork for this. Support for Zuma, as measured when he entered the congress, was overwhelming in of itself and in relation to the welcome president Thabo Mbeki received. In his secretariat report to congress, Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi contextualised the allegations of corruption within the realm of possible political manipulation. He said 'they fit into the pattern of being raised in the run up to important political events'. Whilst the allegations should be investigated, Vavi pointed out that Zuma has played a critical role in maintaining the alliance behind the scenes. 'It would be a blow to working people if the investigations drag on or tarnish his image or worse, if they are proved to be correct.' It is rather ironic



that Zuma is being portrayed as a champion of the working class when he was one of the first ANC leaders after 1994 who called for the cancellation of his membership with the SA Communist Party.

Aside from support for Zuma there appeared to be a stronger sense of support for the ANC than at the previous congress. A trade unionist said an ANC caucus at the congress appeared to influence deliberations in

terms of which resolutions were discussed. The bulk of the socio-economic resolutions tabled at congress were referred to the CEC for discussion, however, those of concern to the ANC were debated. Another unionist said attempts at criticising the ANC, which had subtly been evident during the previous congress, were squashed. Another unionist said the Cosatu leadership showed a lot of self-restraint during the congress. He said in

Retreat from independence to subordination?

As the recently held 8th Cosatu congress was winding down, a senior Cosatu leader, perhaps inadvertently, summed up the harsh reality of worker expectations: 'we can only hope that these issues (discussed at the congress) will eventually be adequately dealt with.' Indeed, it would seem as though 'hope' is about the only thing that Cosatu can count on these days: hope, that alliance leaders really do mean what they say to the workers about political democracy and socio-economic justice; hope that corporate capital can be 'disciplined' enough by a vibrant and ideologically tight alliance to give up its penchant for casualising labour and profit maximisation at the expense of the working class; hope that the SACP can become more than just a top-down socialist talk-shop and someday lead the workers into the glorious second stage of the national democratic revolution (NDR); and, hope that somehow the ANC will actually take the struggles and demands of organised workers and poor communities seriously enough to force a radical change in government's neo-liberal socio-economic policies that are causing such devastation to the majority of South Africans. The expectations of workers in Cosatu have not always been hostage to such unrealistic hopes. Almost ten years ago, in the aftermath of the democratic victory of 1994, Cosatu's future looked bright. However, less than a decade later, the reality for Cosatu is that it now finds itself politically marginalised. The litany of the failures of the alliance to act as a meaningful political vehicle for Cosatu and the working-class interests it shoulders should have seen Cosatu affiliates and leaders furiously engendering discussions at the 8th congress around intensifying working class socio-economic struggles and political alternatives to the alliance. Instead, the congress turned out to be more of an alliance political rally dominated by speeches from ANC-SACP leaders, limited debate and the same stale rhetoric from Cosatu leadership simultaneously decrying the continuing ineffectiveness of the alliance and recycling the same ineffective insider 'solutions'. One worker delegate proclaimed in exasperation that, 'the first two days were like an ANC rally.' The congress did begin a process of engaging the serious organisational and financial problems that are afflicting many affiliates. And yet, the unwillingness to draw the links with Cosatu's political relationship with the ANC-SACP as well as the effects of the ANC government's neo-liberal policies on workers ensures that the roots of such problems cannot, and will not, be fundamentally tackled.

This is an edited version of an article by Dale McKinley.

ensuring support for the ANC in the upcoming elections, Cosatu leaders could not give members mixed messages and then tell them to go and vote. This congress was therefore, about compromises, he said. Another unionist said this approach was adopted with the knowledge that after the next elections 'there is a general expectation that there will be a clampdown on Cosatu'.

The congress emerged with a renewed commitment to ensure trade union unity. A trade unionist said the emphasis on the need for unity could place the federation in a rather difficult position. On the one hand it relied on the ANC for political power. However, if Cosatu was serious about unity in the labour movement it might have to let go of its attachment to the alliance. The adoption of the 2015 plan has been seen as an important development as it seeks to develop a long-term vision for the federation. Some weaknesses highlighted include the ability of Cosatu to intervene in affiliates which are experiencing problems. Some trade unionists said this could only be achieved if the federation itself has internal capacity to adopt a more interventionist approach. There are numerous examples, an official said, where the federation is not able to enforce decisions such as around the demarcation of unions.

The Cosatu leadership emerged from congress claiming the congress a success because of the adoption of the organisational review process and the 2015 plan. The 2015 plan is not only a political strategy to deal with the ANC and restore Cosatu's place in the alliance but is also an attempt to inject a sense renewal within Cosatu. Throughout the congress, various union leaders spoke of the need to build a strong Cosatu. This commitment stems from the realisation that if Cosatu is to

be taken seriously within the alliance then it needs to rebuild its organisation. This process is not intended to be a quick fix and if implemented will result in the restoration of affiliates, internal systems, proper accountability of leaders and the overall growth of the federation. Proper accountability was lacking during the rather lengthy debate or as some claim a non-debate around who is a member in good standing and who is eligible to stand for elections.

There is a sense that key socio-economic resolutions were not debated and instead the congress got bogged down in this non-debate which arose because there was insufficient transparency around the election of Cosatu's second vice-president. A unionist said the election of the second vice-president was badly handled because the leadership failed to be upfront about the issue.

This created some elements of factionalism at the congress, a delegate added. However, another said, that this issue should have been opened up to proper debate as a lot of worker leaders and office bearers have been losing their jobs. This issue was forced underground and the process did not land up being fair and democratic. 'We criticise the ANC for lack of democracy but on this matter we fell short', a unionist said. He said this issue was not decisively dealt with and failed to address problems in unions such as Nehawu.

Ultimately, congresses tend to adopt a more political focus. However, this should be tempered with some serious stocktaking. When charting the way forward there has to be a realistic sense about the strength of the organisation. The challenge now is to ensure implementation or Cosatu delegates will gather yet again in three years time rehashing the same ground.