

Where there's a will....

Labour Bulletin: A number of decisions on organisational renewal were taken at the recent COSATU congress. How will these be implemented?

Sibilowa: Last November COSATU held a special executive committee meeting. We drew up a draft programme to implement the congress decisions. The plan was subsequently re-worked and presented to a meeting of affiliate general secretaries.

The programme is not only aimed at implementation. It should also enable us to respond to pressures resulting from, amongst others, the ANC conference and what is happening at Ncdlac. We must not wait for pressures to arise before we develop policy.

The programme we have adopted deals with the following areas:

- ❑ *Building organisation at the political, socio-economic and international levels*
- ❑ *Education and communication, which are crucial to organisation*
Here, we are not talking about departments as such, but the kind of education programme and campaigns one needs. If union members and society generally are to be kept on board, we must have also an effective communications strategy.
- ❑ *A mass recruitment campaign, which will hopefully take place in April.*
Affiliates will have to put aside resources - financial and human - to support this

COSATU general secretary, Sam Sibilowa, talks to Sakhela Buhlungu and Eddie Webster.

campaign. They must ensure that shopstewards get paid time off to recruit. But this is not enough. Each affiliate must also have information about which industrial areas they are less organised in - or not organised at all.

❑ *Servicing members*

If you cannot service your membership, then you'll recruit members, but a few months later they'll move out of the organisation. Each affiliate must look at their own servicing problems. We don't want to discuss this in a bureaucratic way - like saying "are there organisers at the factory each and every day?" That's not the kind of organisation we are trying to build. We want a movement where workers and shopstewards, together with organisers, build organisation. We have to empower shopstewards so that they are able to deal with issues on the shopfloor and answer workers' questions.

Our real challenge, however, lies in the direction we give workers on the key issues they face at the shopfloor: workplace re-organisation, productivity questions. That's where workers get stuck. Linked to this is collective

bargaining. What we are able to deliver is part of the service. This applies to negotiations with both employers and government. You have a factory, you go out and you recruit. You've got new shopstewards - what happens then? As new members, there are so many issues workers want to take up with their companies. Affiliates have got to put aside resources to educate shopstewards. Training should not be restricted to negotiations skills.

Shopstewards must know COSATU's basic policies, be they political or socio-economic.

Building COSATU

Within the federation, there are weak affiliates and strong affiliates. What assistance do they require? In the past we have tended to equate assistance to affiliates with how much money we can throw at them. We must identify which unions need assistance and what form this assistance should take.

□ The public sector

Transformation will not succeed unless the public sector unions are transformation oriented. We want to build the capacity of these affiliates and recruit more members in the public sector. This includes the new bureaucrats who come from the democratic movement.

□ Assessing COSATU structures

We've got to look at the COSATU CEC. Does it have the capacity and ability to drive this programme? What about our locals? Congress has given us the opportunity to rebuild the locals. We



have agreed that the four COSATU office-bearers will each be responsible for two locals. That doesn't take away my responsibility there, nor that of other CEC members. All members of the CEC must also be allocated a local or a group of locals.

We can put together this plan, but the key question is whether affiliates are going to implement it. COSATU, as the centre, can do certain things, but it all depends on how the unions integrate the federation programme into their own programmes.

Labour Bulletin: Congress also agreed to develop the COSATU head office as the engine of the federation by making all office-bearer positions full-time. Has this been put into practice?

Sbilla: Congress did not say that they should be full-time, paid employees of the federation. It means full-time availability to do COSATU work. Now, some of these office-bearers are not even full-time shopstewards. We agreed that myself and the general secretaries of NUMSA, SACTWU and FAWU will go and speak to management so that these comrades (John Gomomo, Connie September and Peter Malepe) are made available. This is the basis on which they will be full-time. The comrades themselves will have to speak to the shopsteward committees and workers in their factories so that they don't expect them to be there on a daily basis.

Immediately after the congress, we worked out a schedule of meetings. But we don't want them only at head office. They will be allocated provinces and their job is to make sure that our overall programme is implemented at that level. We will meet every second Monday to assess progress.

You will remember that part of that resolution was that the EXCO will now meet monthly. The president and general secretary of each union will come together to look at the direction we are taking, and mandates for negotiations. We hope to do the same thing at regional and local level.

So, there are many good intentions. But these will require political will from the affiliates and the leadership. We raised this at the meeting with the general secretaries. We said that it's all very well to pass resolutions and have a three year programme, but the key question is to what extent they are committed to that programme. It's their programme, and they must see that it is carried out.

Labour Bulletin: At the COSATU congress GEAR was rejected and it was decided that this would be taken up at the ANC conference. Did this happen?

Sbilla: The first thing I would like to say is that COSATU's call for workers to participate in ANC structures was really heeded. At least a third of the delegates to the conference were workers. For me, this means that working class leadership within the ANC is not just a slogan.

There was a commission which dealt with macro-economic transformation and another which focussed on provision of infrastructure. In both commissions, what became clear is that the ANC, COSATU and the SACP are at one in saying that we need to agree on a transformatory agenda. The key debate is what this agenda constitutes. What are we going to do in the areas of health, education, social welfare and so forth? What kind of macro-economic policies do you need to build these services?

If you look at the conference resolutions, it is clear that the outcome of the COSATU congress had an impact on the ANC. But the alliance meetings late last year also had an impact. The conference emerged with a position very similar to decisions made at those meetings - that no macro-economic policy should be cast in stone, and that the existing policy (GEAR) must be opened up for debate in the ANC at branch, regional and national level.

Contrary to what the commercial media said, a deal was never placed before conference for adoption or rejection. The debate focussed less on GEAR than on what ANC policy should be. It is this policy that will guide ANC structures and the national executive in influencing government decisions.

There are two key challenges ahead. The first is that, as COSATU, we take forward the debate. This is not to say that we are going to engage in endless theoretical meanderings. We don't want to create a paralysis. One of the crucial differences is around industrial policy. Currently, there's



job creation. But we want that consolidated. It will help us in our negotiations at Nedlac and at the Jobs Summit. The same goes for industrial policy.

The final point I want to make is that there are many areas where we are in complete agreement with the ANC. There are very few differences on things like health and education. There may be problems around teacher redeployment, but we agree on the broad thrust. The real debate is about how you put together the necessary resources so that you are able to deliver these social services. Even here, it's not about whether you have a 2% or 4% budget deficit, it's about how we manage our finances in the light of budget constraints. This is what transformation is really about.

no job creation. Obviously, we will explain some of the things that we're doing from our side. Then there is the question of social infrastructure.

The other important issue is whether the ANC itself can use decisions made at both the congress and the conference to say that, in the year in which we're going to face a general election, we will be able to resolve the differences between us. This will require compromises on both sides, not so much to reach a short-term election pact, but to ensure that our long-term relationship is not based on constant squabbling about macro-economic policy.

In line with the decision taken at our congress, COSATU has set up special structures to look at socio-economic issues. We are obviously not going to be able to come up with final positions at this stage. We have asked Naledi to assist us with research on key issues. We've got various proposals as COSATU on what to do about

Labour Bulletin: There's been a lot in the press recently about the future of Nedlac. What is your view?

Shilowa: My own view is that Nedlac will survive as one of the institutions that are necessary for democracy to flourish in our country and to ensure participation of workers in decision making around economic issues. Of course, we don't only ensure participation through Nedlac. We also intervene directly in the legislative process through parliament.

Despite the recent statements from the different parties in Nedlac, and from parties outside of it, business, labour and the government are all agreed that it's an institution that all of us should do whatever we can to preserve.

COSATU has had both successes and failures at Nedlac. The failures have been not so much in terms of whether or not we have achieved everything that we set out to

achieve, but that in certain instances we have failed to drive a particular agenda. As COSATU, we have not sat down and decided what the key issues are that we want to drive at Nedlac. This is something that we've got to correct. We've agreed that we need to have an urgent meeting of all our Nedlac negotiators and the CEC to decide on our agenda at Nedlac for the first half of this year.

Another area of concern is that when business or government place issues on the Nedlac agenda, we take too long to develop a position. For example, when the basic conditions of employment negotiations begin, we had very clear positions on what we wanted to achieve. The problem was that we focussed on every little section in the Bill. We should rather have identified the areas we should focus on and be prepared to fight over.

I must qualify this by saying that the new Basic Conditions of Employment Act is a vast improvement on the old one. There have been numerous other successes, which do not always make the headlines. We have been able to make an impact on the budget. We have pushed for the transformation of health services and demanded real housing delivery. We got Stals to come and account for his monetary policies.

The challenge is not so much whether as labour we're winning what we want. It's whether we use the alliance to plan properly, not so much on the detail of every issue that's going to come up at Nedlac, as on the key strategic questions around the economy, around social transformation, so that there's less time spent with in-fighting between COSATU and the government and more time spent trying to ensure that business also comes on board with regard to these issues.

There are some issues which we are going to take up in Nedlac, but which really have got nothing to do with government,

and everything to do with business. The massive retrenchments in the private sector are an example. Government has a role to play, but it's something employers have to account for. It goes beyond legislation. I agree that we need to increase productivity, but who benefits out of that increased productivity? How do we drive workplace reorganisation so that it does not lead to job loss?

Labour Bulletin: There were major differences within the alliance on basic conditions of employment. What lessons has COSATU learned from these negotiations?

Sbillova: The first important thing is that, as COSATU, we have firm policies on issues. This means that when people go out of line, they know that the great majority of workers will not approve. We are also able to influence the parliamentary process. These are two of our cylinders. The third is the alliance. We have to be able to fire on all three.

The alliance must not look at things on an *ad hoc* basis. We must not operate on the basis of crisis management. We have to look at things together. The ANC has a new leadership. Each year, we should develop a programme which we commit ourselves to pursuing. We should schedule two alliance summits every year. At the end of the year, we must evaluate how we have dealt with issues.

The new leadership must also be fully in tune with what the ministers are doing. They must establish the central role of the movement in guiding overall policy formulation. They must set the parameters in which the ministers work. This will require that the ANC headquarters are properly staffed. I had a sense that this is what was coming out of the ANC conference.

I was elected to the ANC NEC. It is not so

much how I use my position to advance workers' interests, but how to ensure that the agenda of the movement broadly represents working class issues

It's all going to depend on the political will of the ANC to implement the resolutions that came out of Mafikeng and whether the alliance as a whole takes these matters seriously.

Labour Bulletin: In 1994 COSATU lost many key personnel to government, resulting in severe capacity problems. Will this happen again in 1999?

Shilowa: Congress decided that we must support the ANC in the 1999 elections and make resources available. It did not say that we should release people to go to parliament. We still need to discuss that at our Central Committee, and with the ANC. We also have to decide on a platform of issues that will form the base of our support.

We will be guided by both the experience of 1994 and the needs of the current situation. We face a dilemma here. We could put all our energy into building COSATU and sit on the outside and demand that whatever the ANC does has a working class bias. We have to remember, however, that although the ANC has the interest of workers at heart, it also represents other interests. If these other interests release people to go into government, and we don't, we could find ourselves in a losing position.

At the same time, we must do things in such a way that we don't weaken our own organisation. The problem is not really about releasing people, it's about developing a second layer of leadership so that if people



leave the organisation, we can carry on without them. No individual should ever be indispensable.

Labour Bulletin: The COSATU congress also discussed the performance of unionists who were sent to parliament after the last elections.

Shilowa: The resolution on this issue should be seen in terms of what our relationship with parliament and the government should be. Most of the members of parliament who come from within the ranks of COSATU, whether they are ministers or MECs or just ordinary members, are putting forward positions in favour of working class people, whether we've had discussions with them or not. There are some who've taken positions

which in no way advance this cause. We might as well not have them in parliament.

Having said this, I think it would be a mistake for COSATU to think that we can send 20 people to parliament and in this way exert real influence. They are 20 out of 400. We obviously need to ensure that they remain faithful to working class positions, but the more important thing is to make sure that the ANC itself is not an anti-worker organisation.

One of the ways we can do this is to brief chairs of all the standing committees on what our issues are. That will require that we have clear positions. COSATU should also call an open meeting with members of parliament. There are members who do not have any trade union track record, but whose views are very impressive to us.

For the forthcoming elections, we have several options. We could say that COSATU members who are elected to parliament should remain members, or remain linked to a structure. We can use the ANC parliamentary caucus to outline important issues and engage in debate. We did this with the LRA and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act. We also need to build up our own parliamentary office in Cape Town. We must not forget, however, that there are nine other parliaments. We need to look at how our regional offices can build relationships with the provincial parliaments.

Labour Bulletin: Alliances between a labour federation and a political party lead, in the views of some, to the marginalisation of labour. Has COSATU been marginalised in the alliance?

Sbllowa: I am not dismissive of these concerns. This is, however, not the only possible outcome.

Overall, I would say that COSATU has been able to influence issues. Health

minister, Nkosasana Zuma, and ourselves are at one on health policy. The same can be said of many other ministers. The areas of contention are macro-economic policy and privatisation. There was practically no consultation on these matters.

COSATU has taken up these issues. Immediately after privatisation was announced, we had a meeting with Mbeki and the result was the National Framework Agreement.

But we should never lose our sense of struggle. We have to always be on our toes. When ministers go the wrong way, workers must respond. You remember that GEAR was pronounced non-negotiable. As the labour movement, we said that the words 'non-negotiable' do not exist in our vocabulary. We've gone through a long, labourious process, but we now have an alliance position which says that it was wrong for the ANC to say that it will not consult with its allies. Being in an alliance means that each party has to defend each policy on its own merits. Where it does not stand up to scrutiny it has to be able to change.

To sum up, if you look at the constitution, if you look at the pieces of legislation that have come through Nedlac in spite of the struggles that have happened, if you look at broader policies, I would say that the alliance has been able to drive all of these areas. But it has also shown that there has to be resilience. The fact that we are in alliance does not mean that we subordinate workers' interests.

Labour Bulletin: In his address to the ANC conference, President Mandela made a remark about some unions developing an alternative leadership to the ANC (see p 41). Do you see this as an attack on COSATU?

Sbllowa: No. He was talking about a particular time period, when the ANC was

underground

This does not mean that there are not people within COSATU who do not belong to the ANC and who see the trade union movement as an alternative and an opposition.

COSATU policy is very clear. We recognise the ANC as the leader of the liberation struggle and the leader of the alliance. We also recognise that as the alliance we are the only force capable of transformation. We are a democratic organisation. If there are other views within COSATU, this is part of the debate.

Labour Bulletin: President Mandela also said that organised workers are relatively privileged. Is this an accurate reflection of the situation on the ground?

Shilowa: One of the approaches that we took in the ANC conference is that COSATU can't be hypersensitive to criticism by the ANC. If we do, we'll become paranoid. When we go to our own congress we pull no punches. We went to that conference expecting the ANC leadership to be open and frank. In the same way that we have every right to criticise the ANC, they have every right to criticise us. The key question is what you do thereafter.

Obviously, if you're comparing somebody who earns no wages and somebody who is working, you could make that differentiation. I hope, however, that the President did not really mean that workers are privileged. We all know about the level of inequality in this country.

* The differences between the way management live and the levels of poverty in the homes of even the workers who are working are indecent. The President himself has made this observation on several occasions in the past.



Labour Bulletin: At the COSATU congress it was resolved to form closer links with sections of civil society such as progressive intellectuals. How do you hope to bring this about?

Shilowa: The one big problem is that, in our society, most progressive intellectuals are either standing on the sidelines as we go on with the challenge of transformation, or they have bought into the agenda that says that the kind of transformation we are demanding is not possible. There are those who we believe can help to shape the transformation agenda of the labour movement. We need to look at our relationship with them.

Naledi should be getting progressive individuals and institutions involved in developing alternatives. The federation should also consider a meeting with progressive academics to consider how they

think the relationship between COSATU and themselves can be developed. How can they back up COSATU positions and agendas intellectually?

There are some people who painted a progressive position in the 1980s, but are now saying there's no alternative to neo-liberalism. They caricature the labour movement. If we put forward a position, they don't interrogate that proposal, but simply say there's no alternative. This is another issue we need to look at.

The ANC, the SACP and the civic movement face the same questions. The ANC is looking at associate membership. Of course, it is a broad church, where the bourgeoisie and the unemployed rub shoulders. It might not work for us. But we have to bring progressive intellectuals on board in one way or another.

Labour Bulletin: The Bulletin has been providing critical support to the labour

movement for 24 years. Any comments on the Bulletin?

Skilane: As COSATU, and as the labour movement more broadly, we really appreciate the resilience of the *Bulletin*. One hopes that in the future it will continue to cover critical issues in an even more challenging way, because now we're looking at issues of transformation. We need debate on workplace organisation, productivity and unemployment from a new perspective. Workers and officials, as well as progressive intellectuals, must support the *Bulletin* so that we can debate these critical issues. ★

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We plead not guilty

Privatisation! The pillar poison of capitalism.
Family relations are turned to money
relations

Vampires are sucking the blood of industrial
soldiers

Fighting privatisation
we plead not guilty

Our people are crying in agony
Living in the society of exploitation
where is the drinking of our nature?
where is our daily bread?

Fighting privatisation
We plead not guilty

Thieves and invaders are suffocating the
nation

The global villains are destroying
humanity

Workers, communities, advance advance!
Solidarity is the key to social services

Fighting privatisation
We plead not guilty

Social life, social relations are now asunder
Children are transformed as instruments of
labour

Open the gate of liberation to free you and I
You have power in your hands

Fighting privatisation
We plead not guilty

Vision and the mission of revolution
Who owns and controls the destiny?
Who is the beneficiary?
Choose change of gear
The world is full of misery

Fighting privatisation
We plead not guilty

**Thabiz Moko, Eastern Cape Provincial
Education Officer, Sakhela**