

NUM Congress

Report by KARL VON HOLDT

Political change, organisational consolidation and gaining greater influence in the mining industry were the key items on the agenda at the NUM congress held in February. However, for the most part the congress simply firmed up already existing policies, rather than adopting any radically new policies.

Politics

The union confirmed its full support for the ANC election campaign. But, in his presidential address James Motlatsi warned that "our relationship with the ANC is not like a one-way street. We shall fight to the last to get the ANC into government, but we expect something in turn.... We expect the ANC to support our fight against the mine owners. It cannot sit on the fence and act as an arbitrator between the union and the mine owners." Motlatsi said that the union wanted substantial measures that would show that "liberation is an emancipatory process touching every aspect of the lives of black people in general and mineworkers in particular".

This perspective was expressed in a congress resolution that the union should "jealously guard the tripartite alliance" so that the "ANC-led government remains working class biased." The resolution also states that NUM members should play a "leading role in ensuring that the ANC and SACP remain mass-based as opposed to being totally swallowed into the parliamentary process," and that a conference of the left, with a socialist bias, should be convened by the SACP and COSATU.

Influence in the mining industry

The NUM's emphasis on a strong alliance with an ANC-led government is partly a reflection of the balance of class power in the mining industry. The giant mining companies are enormously powerful, and the union has



made very little headway in gaining access to decision-making either at mine or industry level. The mining summit has reached no agreement on NUM's proposals for union involvement in managing the industry. Clearly if the union is going to make any inroads it will have to rely on strong state backing.

In line with this core concern, the congress reaffirmed its call for the new government to pass a Social Plan Act that would compel employers to negotiate "all significant workplace changes" with workers and their unions, and to amend the Companies Act to provide full disclosure rights for workers. The congress also resolved that the ANC should press a government of national unity to "provide a framework for the full participation of the union in running the mining industry in the interim period," and that the ANC should establish a commission to "draw up a detailed blueprint for the operation of a commonly owned mining industry" once the five year period of power-sharing is government has passed.

It is likely that NUM will run into stiff



resistance from the ANC on this latter clause, since all current policy makers oppose public ownership on such a scale. However, union insistence may be softened if it wins substantial rights to "full participation". But even this the ANC shows few signs of being keen to deliver. Precisely because of the NUM's expectations of state support, the relation between the union and the ANC may come

under strain sooner than in other sectors.

Consolidating organisation

The NUM is consciously engaged in consolidating organisation. The union is the biggest in COSATU, with 260 000 members -- a remarkable achievement, given the scale of retrenchments in the mining industry. Losses have been offset by membership gains at Impala Platinum (platinum is now the second biggest sector after gold, and before coal), at ESKOM and at Goldfields, and the union has 10 000 more members than at its 1991 congress. The target for 1997 is 400 000.

The foundation of NUM's organisational consolidation is its financial health. The decision to make membership subs 1% of wages, coupled with the relative ease of administering subs from a small number of massive workplaces, has made NUM the most self-sufficient of COSATU affiliates. This enables the union to improve its servicing capacity as well as its specialist departments.

In order to strengthen its organising efforts, NUM has decided to devolve organisational responsibility from head office to the regions.

A resolution to strengthen the head office secretariat by adding a third national secretary was withdrawn, although a resolution for two elected office bearers in each region to become full time officials was adopted.

Other points of interest at the congress include:

- ❑ **Affirmative action:** Congress resolved that affirmative action be legislated and monitored and non-compliance be punishable by law. Motlatsi warned against "tokenism" and black "stooges" at management level, and argued that the union should concentrate on removing obstacles to the advancement of black mineworkers in production and technical services. Motlatsi accepted that it would take time for more blacks to move into staff positions outside the actual mines.
- ❑ **Unity:** Motlatsi warned that the end of apartheid meant that the liberation movement would tend to fragment, conflict would develop between communists and anti-communists, and factions would emerge in unions. Some unions would go bankrupt because of financial pressure, others would be forced to concentrate on their own survival and "jettison fine ideas about alliances with other unions in national and community developments. COSATU will suffer." In post-apartheid SA "there will be a lot of weak links." Unions should work hard to preserve unity, and for this open and healthy political debate was necessary.
- ❑ **Development:** NUM has the most highly developed 'development wing' in COSATU. It has started 30 co-operatives for retrenched mineworkers, and has a job creation unit which trains retrenched workers and facilitates seed finance for their businesses.
- ❑ **New office-bearers:** Gwede Mantash was elected assistant general secretary. A former mine worker, he is known as a dynamic organiser and a committed member of the SACP, Senzeni Zokwana was elected vice-president. ☆