

Jay Naidoo on Cosatu

SALB: How would you assess the first 18 months of COSATU? What have been the main achievements, and the limitations that still have to be overcome?

Jay Naidoo: Before the launch of COSATU there were five different trade union groupings - FOSATU, CUSA, AZACTU, TUCSA, and unions affiliated to the UDF. Today COSATU represents the vast majority of organised workers in the democratic trade union movement - with the exception of SACWU in the chemical industry.

The response of workers to COSATU is proof of this. In 18 months the paid up membership has nearly doubled from approximately 450,000 to about 769,000 and together with our signed up membership COSATU is now over a million strong. This membership will have been consolidated from 33 affiliates into 12 industrial unions/sectors by the Congress. With few exceptions, organised workers outside of COSATU are tiny in comparison and are generally too weak to mobilise strong worker action in support of demands.

Whereas before COSATU workers had only been organised on a regional basis in the main industrial centres, there are now nine fully established COSATU regions covering the whole country. And at a local level COSATU has facilitated the formation of 31 locals compared to less than ten before the formation of COSATU.

Although these are obviously important and significant organisational gains, we still have plenty of work to do in consolidating our organisation and structures; organising the millions of unorganised workers and developing our structures - especially at a local level.

Within COSATU itself one of our main problems has been to consolidate our industrial unions according to our principle of "One Union, One Industry". Although the launching Congress of COSATU set a target for 6 months for this to be completed, this Congress will finally complete the process in terms of COSATU structures. COSATU was launched with 33 affiliated unions and one other union affiliated afterwards. However at this Congress there will only be twelve industrial unions/sectors represented plus SARHWU.

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The sectors where single industrial unions have already been formed are : mining (NUM); metal (NUMSA); food (FAWU); commercial and catering (CCAWUSA); public sector (NEHAWU); chemical (CWIU); textile (NUTW); domestic (SADWU) and construction (CAWU).

In the following sectors the final process of merging will only be completed after Congress: municipal and paper. However unions in these sectors will only be represented at the Congress and in COSATU structures after Congress as sectors and mergers should be finalised within a few months of Congress. The only exception to this is SARHWU. Because of the SATS strike, they were unable to partake in the transport sector's merger talks. They have been allowed to attend Congress as an independent union. SARHWU will merge with the transport union soon after Congress.

Our structures have not functioned nearly as well as they could have so far - but this has mainly been because the process of consolidating industrial unions was not complete. COSATU's constitution assumes big industrial unions and these will only be properly and entirely in place after this Congress. We now expect that progress at national and regional levels will be far smoother than has been the case up to now. On a local level our task is to massively increase the extent of local organisation and to ensure that shop-steward local councils are properly represented and well organised. In the light of increasing state repression and imperialist intervention in our struggle, the tightening of our structures is central on our agenda.

SALB: At the beginning of this year the COSATU executive issued a statement outlining major areas of activity for the movement in the coming period under the theme of the need for consolidation and decisive action. Areas for attention included: closer alliance with organised youth, organisation of unorganised groups (unemployed, farmworkers, building workers, domestic workers), the living wage campaign, establishing defence committees, mergers, building shop steward councils, raising the level of solidarity action, and building mass united action under the leadership of the working class. What moves have taken place in these various areas and what are future plans?

Jay Naidoo: There has been good progress in terms of most tasks that COSATU outlined at the beginning of the year. The message spelt out the need to reassess our strategies particularly in the light of major failures on our side to mobilise and provide

decisive leadership to our membership when we were under attack (e.g. July 14 and December 1 protest actions and the Campaign for United Action). The Executive Committee message focussed the thinking and energies of COSATU on the urgent tasks that faced organised workers in South Africa. We are sure that this will continue and deepen after Congress.

Links between organised workers and youth are better than they have been before. At many levels of COSATU structures formal and informal contact has been initiated and maintained. We expect this to be strengthened much more in the second half of the year. The Congress is expected to give much more decisive direction on this issue.

The organisation of sectors like unemployed, farm, domestic and public sector is proceeding though organisation is still weak. The construction union has rapidly established a national presence.

COSATU has built solid links with the National Unemployed Workers Coordinating Committee (NUWCC) and we hope it will not be long before the unemployed are sufficiently well organised to form a national union and affiliate to COSATU. Much energy and more active involvement of affiliates and our locals needs to take place to assist the organisation of the unemployed.

FAWU's Farmworkers Project has employed 4 organisers and organisation is taking off in some areas. One national recognition agreement has already been signed for farmworkers.

Our Living Wage Campaign has not achieved the depth of organisation, co-ordination and solidarity that we need. But again the fact that single industrial unions are only now coming into place in COSATU has been a big factor hindering the development of our living wage structures. Established industrial unions like NUM and NUMSA in particular have been the main beneficiaries of the campaign so far in practical terms. By next year this should extend to the whole of COSATU. It is however obvious that a national campaign for a living wage seriously threatened the apartheid state and employers - given their response in the form of banning of our rallies, confiscation of union material and the attempt to try and criminalise our campaign by calling it a "communist plot".

The campaign was also important in that it gave COSATU a concrete issue, affecting directly our membership, to link up with our

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democratic allies amongst the youth, civics and other progressive organisations. COSATU will clearly emerge from our coming Congress with more strategies to forge working class leadership in the mass struggles against national oppression and economic exploitation.

The proper organisation and mobilisation of our Living Wage Campaign and other campaigns we decide on are at the same time the best defence COSATU can build against all attacks. This question is expected to be seriously discussed at our Congress.

Solidarity action has very definitely increased as one saw in both the OK dispute and the SATS strike. COSATU has given the organised working class a greater confidence in their collective strength. We see the growth and development of our shop-steward councils as the pillars of strength and the voice of organised workers unity in each industrial area and township.

SALB: To what extent has the programme of COSATU been affected by the state of emergency, and by the intense harassment of the federation and its affiliates in the last few months? How have detentions, bombings and the rest affected your ability to function normally?

Jay Naidoo: COSATU was born in a state of emergency. But our organisational abilities were severely hamstrung by the declaration of the State of Emergency on June 12th last year. However the democratic and strongly rooted shopfloor structures we have built up through mass struggle ensured that we not only survived but emerged more strongly. The attacks have made many more workers conscious of the need to defend our organisation. In this sense it has led to a rallying of forces and has helped to strengthen the organisation. We believe that we are learning to survive under conditions of repression.

The apartheid state and their capitalist allies have no intention of allowing a truly democratic solution to the political and economic crisis South Africa faces, because true democracy will have to involve a fundamental restructuring of our economy and lead to a social and political transformation.

Faced with this, the democratic movement has no option but to build democratic grassroots organisation that will not only advance our struggle for freedom but also defend us from the violence that faces us now. The detentions, the massive smear cam-

campaign mounted against us, and the destruction of COSATU House cannot destroy COSATU because our organisation is not a building or individuals, but the tens of thousands of shop stewards and workers activists across thousands of factories, shops and mines in nearly every city and town in South Africa. For us normality has never really existed and will only exist when we have won our liberation.

SALB: The executive statement issued at the beginning of 1987 also reiterated the slogan "one federation, one country". At the time you did not say how this was to be achieved, however. We are thinking here of the fact that a substantial minority of black workers is organised by NACTU, a situation that weakens COSATU's industrial organisation particularly in those sectors where NACTU affiliates are strong. How do you see such division being overcome?

Jay Naidoo: COSATU's orientation is towards the whole working class - irrespective of what organisations some workers may find themselves in at the moment. Now that we have consolidated our own organisation into industrial unions, we can concentrate on building COSATU in to the one federation in the country.

This is mainly an organisational task. We need to organise the millions of unorganised workers. And we need to win over the underorganised workers from the hundreds of ineffective, undemocratic and politically bankrupt little unions around. Where there are well-organised unions outside COSATU's ranks we will try, as we have already done through our affiliates, to persuade the workers and their leadership that workers must be united. We have succeeded already with this within COSATU. The principles and policies that we forged as workers in the furnace of mass struggle and over 4 years of unity talks are cherished and defended not only by COSATU members but by millions of workers outside COSATU.

Our doors remain open to any democratic union to join our ranks and we can see no reason why all such unions should not come in if they are really interested in mass worker unity. It goes without saying that this will be on the basis of our principles. NACTU, in particular, has had problems with our principle of non-racialism. For us, and for the NACTU leadership I think the principle is an important political one. More than ever before it is crucial to win white workers in to our ranks. Our organisation and policies are, whether white workers know it yet or not, the only way out of

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the nightmare of racism and fascism for the whole working class. We think the basis for a non-racial society has to be laid in the practice of our organisations today. We are opposed to racial-ethnic exclusivity in whatever form it occurs in the labour and democratic movement.

SALB: There are of course other organisational and ideological divisions within the working class whose origins are more suspect. We are thinking here of UWUSA and of the thousands of workers still organised into ex-TUCSA unions. What is COSATU's policy on this front?

Jay Naidoo: We don't consider UWUSA to be a genuine workers organisation and we said that its formation represented a tragic and reactionary step that is attempting to split the unity of the working class and will only serve the interests of our enemies. We have seen considerable violence against our members, like the murder of an NUM official in Vryheid and the subsequent interdict against UWUSA members and officials to prevent further attacks on our members.

SALB: When COSATU was launched it was with a legacy of division loosely along lines of "workerists" versus "populists". You have stated on a number of occasions that this characterisation no longer holds true and is misleading and divisive. What then has occurred to break up the old political patterns and blocs within the labour movement? And how would you characterise political debate within COSATU in the present period - concretely, in the different political policies adopted by NUM and NUMSA for example?

Jay Naidoo: We are seeing a genuine working class politics emerging within COSATU on the basis of the massive and militant struggles that especially organised workers have been waging since the launch of COSATU. The democratic structures of COSATU will not allow so called "workerist" and "populist" fringe groupings to impose their undemocratic control over militant, politicised and organised workers in South Africa. Underlying both the "workerist" and "populist" minority positions is a lack of confidence in the organisation, strength and vision of millions of workers in the country.

Workers are facing forward - in the direction of national liberation and socialism. I believe that everything the militant working class stands for will triumph over any interventions from the

fringe who subvert everything a militant working class movement stands for. Workers class consciousness and confidence in the leading role of their class has developed to a point where they can control their organisation - in the factory and the community - and their policies. The mass struggles fought by workers on the ground have created the basis for this and this has more and more isolated these fringe tendencies.

This is reflected in the resolutions adopted and proposed by NUM and NUMSA - who together represent the majority of COSATU workers. I don't believe there is anything contradictory in these resolutions - they both emphasise different aspects of the workers struggle against apartheid and capitalism for national liberation and socialism. In general both unions see the Charter as laying the basis, or being the minimum programme, for struggle for socialism. Both insist the Charter must be widely discussed among workers and that a workers understanding of the Charter and democracy and/or socialism and/or workers own aims must be developed in struggle.

I feel these resolutions together reflect the direction that workers are actually moving in struggle and the main debate that is going on within COSATU. The struggle for socialism is already unfolding within the struggle for national liberation. The Charter and COSATU's own programme - as reflected in the resolutions adopted at our founding Congress - are part of the bridge workers must build and cross in struggle in order to reach socialism. If workers do not build and lead the workers struggle for the basic democratic rights that all our people have been denied for so long, how will workers ever lead the struggle for socialism.

SALB: More generally how would you describe COSATU's political development since the launch - in terms of alliances it has made as well as its policy orientation? To what extent has COSATU successfully been able to play a leading role in the struggle for national liberation whilst continuing to promote the specific interests of workers and socialism?

Jay Naidoo: COSATU's political policy is shaped by the policies of its affiliates and the mass struggles fought out by workers on the ground. Since the launch of COSATU we have seen the confidence of working class leadership in their class and their power increase tremendously. Examples of bitter working class struggles include BTR, OK, SATS and NUM struggles to gain control of the hostels.

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In this environment, the political policy adopted by our launching congress reached certain limitations.

With organised workers now thrust to the forefront of the mass struggles being fought out, the question of alliances with democratic organisations emerged in struggle and in practice and has been hotly debated in our ranks.

The issues have been dealt with both in NUM and NUMSA where, in addition to the existing principles that have so far guided our political policy (viz. non-racialism, worker control and democracy, national organisation in the form of one union per industry, operating on the basis of paid-up membership/constituency and national co-ordination between affiliates), more concrete guidelines have emerged: the need to ally ourselves with organisations that have a history and record of mass struggle and whose principles are compatible with ours; organisations whose programme of action has the support of workers.

We have also seen joint action with other democratic organisations such as UDF and NECC on May Day, June 16, 5/6 May action.

On our Living Wage Campaign we agreed to draw in our key democratic allies - SAYCO, SANSCO, FEDSAWU, NATSOC and the civics in a campaign led by the organised workers under COSATU.

We don't believe that the struggle for national liberation is antagonistic to the struggle for socialism. Our view is that they are complementary to each other and the working class must locate itself in a leadership position in the national liberation struggle.

Workers, as we have said before, cannot achieve leadership by fighting on isolated fronts - working class leadership is won in struggle - not just in theory.

The organised workers of COSATU have contributed substantially towards putting socialism centrally on the agenda of the mass movement. At the same time, one must recognise that the socialist debate began decades ago - and it was not through the inspiration of comfortable university-based intellectuals, but working class leaders like J B Marks and Moses Mabhida and thousands of worker leaders on the ground.

SALB: What are the major areas that the July Congress will be required to debate and decide upon?

Jay Naidoo: - The political direction of COSATU and the nature and form of COSATU's alliances with its democratic allies.

- The international policy of COSATU in the struggle against imperialism and neocolonialism.
- The international campaign for the isolation of apartheid including disinvestment and sanctions.
- Repression and the need to defend COSATU against the violence unleashed against it.
- Trade union unity and building of one federation in South Africa.
- Unemployment and the steps to be taken to consolidate the organisation of the unemployed and the building of a co-operative movement in South Africa.
- Health and safety in the light of ever increasing loss of lives of workers because employers put profits before safety.
- Migrant labour and the hostel system, which we have committed ourselves to dismantle.

SALB: The Congress is the highest authority within COSATU. Can you explain the relationship of the Congress to the affiliate unions? Are its decisions binding on the affiliates, for example?

Jay Naidoo: The affiliate unions are autonomous. However, they have to operate within the policies and framework of the resolutions and the constitution adopted at the National Congress. These decisions are binding on all affiliates. To us democracy means respecting the decisions of the majority as this is a basic working class principle.

The affiliates are represented on the Congress by one delegate per 500 paid up members. Resolutions or constitutional amendments are submitted by affiliates for discussion and decision of the National Congress. The national office bearers of COSATU are also elected at this Congress.

The National Congress is where the principle of workers control is exercised and where the evaluation and reassessment of past tasks and the future way forward is debated and decided on.

SALB: In very broad terms what are your hopes for the future; how do you see COSATU moving over the next few years?

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Jay Naidoo: I cannot answer that I am certain that COSATU will fulfill its historic role in contributing to the building of working class politics in South Africa and establishing the leading role of workers in our struggle for total liberation. But I am certain that this is what the mass of workers in COSATU are striving with all their energy to do.



photo: Jay Naidoo addresses the Inaugural Congress of COSATU