

Deepening the united front, broadening the anti-apartheid alliance

SALB interviews Chris Dlamini, vice-president of COSATU, soon after the federation's Special Congress in May.

Chris Dlamini is a full-time shop-steward at Kellogg's S.A, the local subsidiary of the giant American multi-national. SALB interviewed Dlamini in his office at the Kellogg's plant in Springs, on the East Rand. On the wall of his office, amongst the posters, cartoons and newspaper clippings, there is a framed document displaying two quotes which seem especially relevant to the situation facing COSATU at present. The document was a gift to Dlamini from a black American director on the Board of the parent company in the United States:

"There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an Idea whose time has come" - Victor Hugo

"Progress always involves risk - you can't steal second base and keep your foot on first" - Frederick Wilcox

SALB: *What was the significance of the Congress?*

Dlamini: The Congress came at a very significant time in our struggle. The political crisis in our country is getting deeper, and the state has

made it clear what its response to the crisis is going to be. The banings on progressive organisations such as the United Democratic Front, and the restrictions on COSATU, show that the programme of the state is basically to

smash the democratic movement. At the same time, the government has introduced the Labour Relations Amendment Bill in Parliament. This poses a very serious threat to us as a trade union movement, to our strength on the shop floor.

So you can see that we are facing a serious attack by the state. The Congress was important because it was a forum for organisations to respond to that attack, to develop our response.

The importance was that the Congress showed that our people are militant and ready for action. The mood of the people is that there can be no accepting the actions of the state. There is no doubt about that.

If you look further, it was significant that the Special Congress built on the resolutions taken at the Second National Congress last year.

Everyone knows that the Second Congress adopted the Freedom Charter, which is the document accepted as a guide by most progressive organisations in South Africa. This move showed clearly that COSATU has an alliance with progressive organisations in the community, and that COSATU is a part of the mass democratic movement struggling for freedom in the country.

By this move the Second Congress helped to develop the unity of the mass democratic movement, and it also gave it a clearer ideological po-



COSATU Vice-President Chris Dlamini

sition. The importance now of the Special Congress is that it consolidated that.

You no longer have a situation whereby different organisations simply adopt the Charter and stop there. But now you have a situation where these various organisations will come together to formulate a joint strategy and programme of action. This has never happened before. Now we will see an even clearer ideological direction developing from a common strategy and action. One would expect the leading role of the working class to come up more clearly in the process. The Congress also decided that COSATU and its allies will convene a broad anti-apartheid conference. This will enable us to develop an anti-apartheid alliance that is as

broad as possible. It is significant that the Congress decided on the strategy of building a broad alliance of all anti-apartheid organisations, irrespective of ideological differences.

SALB: *On the one hand you want to strengthen the united front based on the Freedom Charter, but on the other hand you want to build a broader anti-apartheid alliance with forces that have not adopted the Freedom Charter, or are even opposed to the Charter. Isn't there a contradiction in these two aims?*

Dlamini: We do not see a contradiction, we see both aims happening at the same time. On the one hand our CEC is to meet with our allies to work out a programme of action. Most of our allies have adopted the Charter.

On the other hand, the same meeting will plan and convene the broad anti-apartheid conference. The need for unity has always been there, but now the repression from the state is affecting all organisations and all people in South Africa. This has given a push towards maximum unity.

It would be important for COSATU and its allies to bring closer all the anti-apartheid forces, even if they don't share the same programme that we have. There is a need for the mass democratic movement to bring closer those of our people who are

opposed to apartheid, so that you can see the divide between the forces that are behind apartheid and those forces against apartheid. That is our responsibility.

SALB: *Would the conference include NACTU?*

Dlamini: It would be thrown open to a broad range of organisations, disregarding political affiliation. So NACTU would also come in if it was prepared to do so. Even if the PFP was to come it would be welcome. We would not expect the conference to adopt the Freedom Charter. The basic guidelines would be anti-apartheid unity and a willingness to take action. At the same time, COSATU and its allies will come with a programme of action. We will be the most powerful force at the conference.

SALB: *There was a big community delegation at the Congress, with full speaking rights. This was not the case at previous Congresses. What was the significance of this?*

Dlamini: Previously COSATU has had guest speakers from UDF and from the youth. This started with the birth of COSATU and the clear political stand taken by the federation. But you are right to point out that for the first time in COSATU there was a meeting that involved the community organisations and all other groups that are

seen to be progressive in terms of the political resolution adopted by COSATU at the national congress in 1987.

As you know, in South Africa there has always been a belief within the government, and the employers in particular, that trade unions cannot be mixed with political issues, meaning that trade unions cannot sit with other organisations in structured meetings and discuss trade union programmes as well as community programmes. But at the Congress you could see the bringing together of all the programmes, community and trade union, marrying the two together and coming with one concrete direction.

SALB: *Was there any resistance in COSATU to inviting community organisations to the Congress?*

Dlamini: At the CEC where the decision was taken affiliates were unanimous on the need to invite our allies. They took into account that the state is trying to narrow the legal space for organisations to operate in. As organisations that still are allowed to operate, the trade unions are obliged to invite the entire democratic movement.

SALB: *What direction did the Congress set for the future?*

Dlamini: It broke down the barriers, that workers should tackle their own problems, community or-

ganisations should tackle their own problems, and political organisations should tackle their own problems. Congress seemed to accept that the problems faced by working people are the same as those faced by community organisations, and they also have an effect on political organisations - so the problems were grouped together and said to be an attack on all the people. So people came out with the decision that the response should be directed at all these attacks.

In terms of action, as the Congress was representative of all social groups in the country, so the action will include everyone. That will be a signal to the government that workers and the community are no longer prepared to take the attacks without responding.

The Congress adopted a declaration condemning 40 years of Nationalist rule. People took a very clear stand, that they don't accept the bannings and restrictions. Their mood of defiance indicated that they are taking their destiny in their own hands. They do not accept the sincerity of the government and its reforms. This has implications for the Municipal Elections which are coming up, although we are not allowed to freely debate the issue because of the Emergency restrictions.

SALB: *Will the protest action be a success?*

Dlamini: Looking at the mood of the workers, since there was talk of this Bill, the workers have wanted to act. We have seen demonstrations in hundreds of factories where we are organised. We have seen workers arrested in hundreds in some areas when they went onto the streets to protest. We have heard in many of our locals where shop stewards have talked about the restrictions on COSATU, that it cannot oppose the municipal elections in October, and they are saying that cannot be accepted because the elections will directly affect them.

That is proof that the workers are ready to do something. When the Congress was postponed the first time, shopstewards were very unhappy. They came out openly, saying the workers were ready to take immediate action. It is clear that people on the ground are ready to take action. At the Congress itself there were 1500 delegates.

Those are representatives from the ground. Those are the people who are going to take action, and they are the ones who took the decision. So their action is likely to be a success.

SALB: *Before the Congress it seemed from what people were saying that the major debate would be whether to advance or retreat. Has that been an issue of debate?*

Dlamini: In formal structures that has never been an issue, but in informal structures in unions that was an issue. But the idea of not advancing never gained much support. The argument that people have been putting forward is that the situation we find ourselves in, under serious attack from the state, is because of the struggle our people have waged, the action they have taken. To retreat now is not going to mean the Department of Manpower will withdraw the Bill, or that the Minister will lift the restrictions. In fact retreat will make it worse.

If we retreat Manpower will go ahead with the Bill, and include provisions that are not there now, but that are even worse for the unions. The Minister would probably extend the restrictions on COSATU to cover affiliates too. Recently it seemed they wanted to ban union meetings, but that was prevented because of opposition by workers. They would probably put that into operation if we decided to retreat. So the question of retreat was put aside by the majority of workers. At Congress there was no significant opposition to action.

SALB: *So what you are saying is that to retreat now would invite the state and the employers to increase their attacks further?*

Dlamini: Right, and erode all the gains that workers have made so far,



Workers versus the new Labour Bill

Photo: Tsuks Mokolobate/Learn and Teach

and even transform unions into liaison committees.

SALB: *What do you foresee in terms of action from the state, now that COSATU has taken the position of advancing?*

Dlamini: We do expect that the state will move against certain people, mainly leadership in COSATU and also in certain affiliates - that we can't rule out. People should know that and work out ways to respond if that happens.

SALB: *Is there any prospect of forcing the state to retreat, to withdraw from its attack?*

Dlamini: I for one don't think I can answer that. The state is intent on crushing all resistance, and for it

to retreat would mean forcing it to agree that there should be change in the country. I believe that there are some people in the government and business circles who are beginning to realise that there are struggles and there are demands that the workers and the people as a whole cannot abandon. They mean life or death to the people - like the question of housing, the question of unemployment, and all the political issues affecting the people. There is no way people can put them in the background and forget about them, because they affect the people directly.

With this understanding I think there are some people who are going to make the government realise there are fundamental issues which need to be addressed. I don't

know if you can call them divisions, but they are different points of view that one starts to see. For instance, Nothnagel stating that the banned organisations will have to be brought in if there is to be lasting peace.

SALB: *Apart from the task of uniting progressive organisations, and unifying anti-apartheid forces more broadly, are there not more concrete organisational tasks in COSATU?*

Dlamini: Our organisational tasks have not changed. We have made some progress in moving to one industry, one union. But actions that we decide on often mobilise workers who are not part of our structures. We must bring those workers into our structures. There are also unions outside that must come in, so we can actually say we have one country, one federation. We have organisational tasks around the Living Wage Campaign. We need to revive this campaign, and revive Living Wage structures. This campaign should also cement our relations on the ground with our allies in the communities. We are fighting deteriorating conditions in the factories, they are fighting deteriorating conditions in the communities. We need to co-ordinate and join up these bread-and-butter struggles. COSATU locals also need to be strengthened. They are the founda-

tion of COSATU.

SALB: *What was at stake in*

the debate on the political resolution?

Dlamini: The resolution put forward by Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) was saying that if we want broad unity we should invite all those who are affected by apartheid. Those such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) who opposed the resolution were saying if we do that we will get bogged down at the very conference as to whether to act or not. If you look at the history of some organisations, and the struggles waged by them, you find that there is no significant struggle that has been waged. Action was never taken by them. When they enter any meeting their position would be to stifle action. NUM put forward the resolution that COSATU convene a conference with its proven allies in order to build the united front. In the end people agreed to combine the positions in the two motions. We saw a unanimous resolution that we should get together with our allies as people who have a history of struggle, people who have been involved in action, and map out a programme of action. The resolution also stated that anti-apartheid unity should be

broadened by convening a conference where we can invite all organisations opposed to apartheid. That is why people agreed in the end, because the final resolution set out a way of moving towards the broad unity people are talking about, instead of getting bogged down and coming up with nothing.

SALB: *You have been involved personally in the struggle to build trade unions through the 1970s and 80s. You were involved in CCOBTU, FOSATU and now COSATU. How would you assess this Special Congress in the light of that history, what progress has been made?*

Dlamini: There has been significant progress made by our people in terms of the unity of the working class, and more particularly the working people. Unions had different views and understanding of issues - for example the unions were really divided between those who favoured registration and those who did not. All those petty issues have been thrown in the dustbin. Now you have the majority of people coming together and shaping the way forward, and at the same time responding to state repression. There was not that much antagonism displayed at Congress. Of course people did argue on cer-

tain points, but those points did not seem to set up a wall dividing those who were seen to be progressive from those seen to be reactionary. You had a debate centred around points that were inclined to unite a broad spectrum of our people.

Also, all affiliates participated to the fullest, and everyone was free and open to say whatever he or she wanted to say.

In FOSATU we were involved in the unity talks with other unions and federations for four years. At the time it looked like we were not going to be able to build one federation. But we showed that the differences were not fundamental. People always differ ideologically - which is healthy, as one speaker said, it is healthy if people share views with the aim of coming up with one decision.

The unity talks prior to the formation of COSATU provide us with some experience. We can draw lessons from that for achieving unity now.

As FOSATU we did not see the need to link with other organisations outside the factory. But with COSATU we realised that if there are problems in the broader democratic movement, that cannot be solved by withdrawing from the broader struggle. Problems can only be solved with the conscious participation of the organised workers.