

Countdown to general strike

4-5 November



Cosatu recently withdrew from the National Manpower Commission (NMC). MAYIBUYE spoke to Sam Shilowa, the recently elected Assistant General-Secretary of Cosatu, about this decision and the anti-VAT campaign.

MAYIBUYE: What are the reasons for Cosatu's withdrawal from the NMC?

SAM SHILOWA: The first reason is that in terms of the Laboria Minute (the 1990 agreement be-

tween labour, business and government) there was agreement that the NMC would be restructured. Unfortunately, what has happened is that the Minister has delayed and prolonged the life of the NMC as it is presently struc-

tured. Since our participation was a conditional one, we decided to withdraw because we felt that he wanted us to just continue participating without restructuring the body to make it more effective.

MAYIBUYE: Won't the government simply continue with the NMC, taking decisions without you, which would affect the workers that you represent?

SS: For a number of years, they went about without our participation. Then the realities about the force that we represent compelled them to agree to our participation. The issue around the Labour Relations Act, the negotiations around that Act, proved beyond any doubt that they cannot pass any labour legislation without our involvement. A law passed in such a way would not succeed.

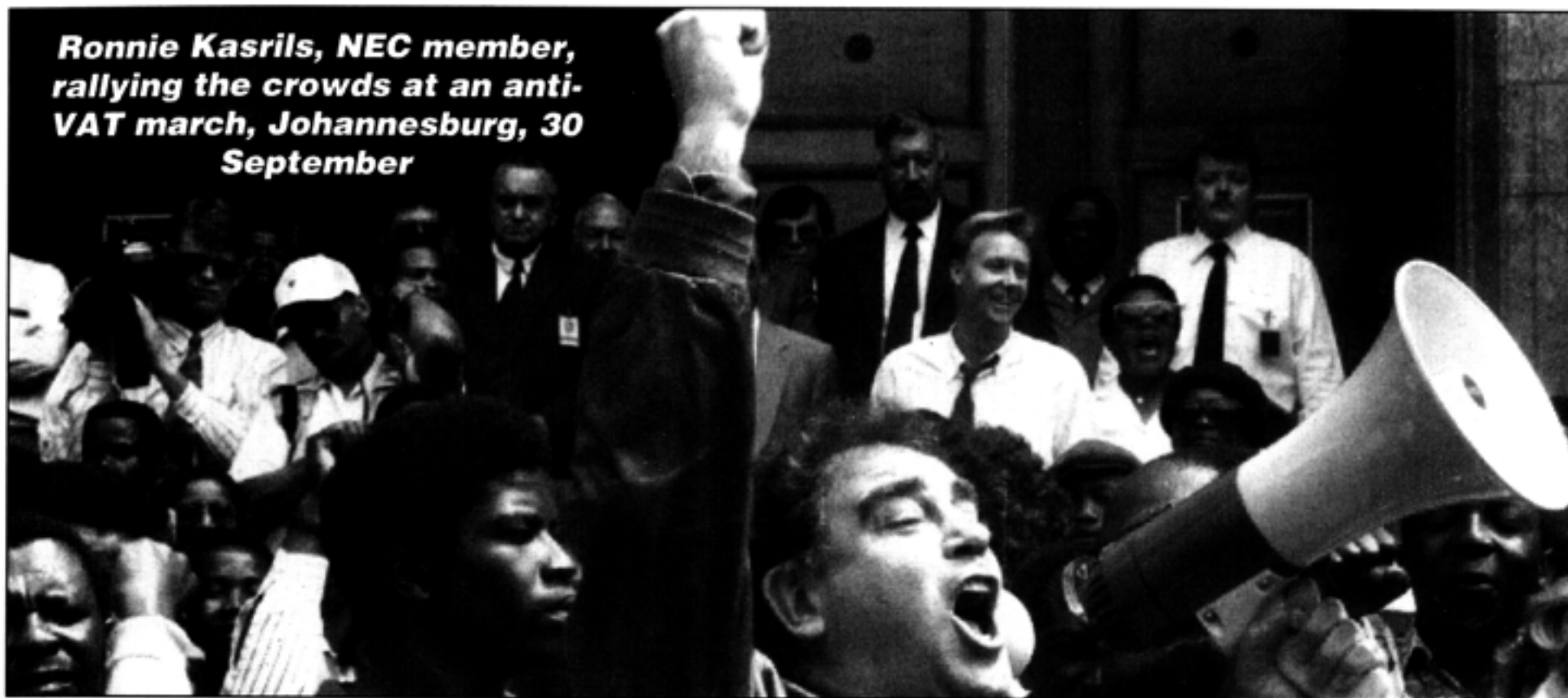
We therefore do not think that the NMC will go very far without our involvement. In fact, we are leaving the government with a very clear statement of principle – that we do not enter into agreements for the sake of entering into those agreements, but we do so because we think that everyone must fulfill their side of the undertaking.

MAYIBUYE: Is there any connection between the withdrawal and the anti-VAT campaign?

SS: When we finally withdrew from the NMC, it was at about the time that we received a letter from the Minister that he was not prepared to continue discussions that we had started on the restructuring of the economy. VAT is about the restructuring of the economy. Therefore the two issues are intimately linked.

When the letter came, feelings were already running high against VAT and, naturally, that letter fuelled them. On the one hand we had them saying that they do not want to enter into discussions about the restructuring

Ronnie Kasrils, NEC member, rallying the crowds at an anti-VAT march, Johannesburg, 30 September



of the economy while on the other they were restructuring it through the implementation of VAT. When you look at our demands you will see that they centre around VAT. Of course, De Klerk says that we want to bring in the Interim Government through the back door. We say that that is not the case.

We simply want to be consulted when such deep-going decisions are being made about our lives. We are also saying that discussions on the restructuring of the economy must be conducted in one forum where employers, labour, the state and any political parties that want to make a contribution will be represented.

MAYIBUYE: What are the planned campaigns against VAT?

SS: The general strike is the major one. But in terms of mobilisation, we have already had a number of marches. There is a rally planned for 27 October at Athlone Stadium in Cape Town. A number of regions are presently discussing how to conduct marches during the day of the general strike.

To us this will be the first instalment. We are planning sustained mass action. After the two days, we are going to review the response of the government and plan how to continue until such

time that they meet our demands. It is interesting to note that many of our members are angry with the Central Executive for having decided on two days because they think that we should have gone for a week or more. What we felt was that we do not want our action to be a once-off thing. It must be sustained and draw even more people as it goes along.

MAYIBUYE: The general strike will take place during examination time. In what way will this affect the strike?

SS: We would have liked everybody, including the students, to participate in the general strike. But the reality is that a suggestion to postpone the examinations would be incorrect. It would divide the community. We would not wish to play into the hands of our enemy by asking for a postponement of the exams for the students to participate in the strike.

MAYIBUYE: There are those people who say that students, in general, should not be involved in issues such as strikes, stayaways and so on. What is your opinion?

SS: Such people are missing the point and are politically naive. The very same students they would not want to participate are

now paying VAT on a number of issues. They are dependent on income from people who are workers and this means that as the standard of living goes down, and in some cases below the poverty datum line, it affects them directly. So the anti-VAT campaign is something that they themselves have an interest in.

We have agreed, together with education and student organisations, that we must create the best conditions for them to write their exams and we are certain that they will be involved in other aspects of the campaign against VAT later.

MAYIBUYE: What are the minimum demands you expect the government to meet?

SS: Our conditions are as follows: We want the government to agree

- to zero-rate all basic foodstuffs, medicines and medical services;
- to enter into meaningful negotiations around the question of the poverty relief programmes;
- to enter into negotiations with the small business movement;
- and, obviously, enter into negotiations with us on economic restructuring

If they give in on these, we are prepared to reconsider our position. If they do not, we shall carry on with mass action. ♦