
COSATU SPECIAL CONGRESS



The COSATU Special Congress succeeded in regrouping and unifying the democratic movement around a concrete programme for moving forward. This programme consisted of concrete mass action (the three day protest) and a longer term strategy of alliances based on action.

WHAT was really impressive about the COSATU Special Congress was the consciousness amongst delegates of possessing real political power. The organised working class has become a force powerful enough to actively shape the course of history in this country.

For two days 1500 delegates from all industries, from all corners of South Africa, discussed the strategies of the state. They argued about the overall balance of forces. They considered the strengths and weaknesses of the democratic movement. And with militant confidence they resolved on immediate action against government repression, as well as adopting a bold plan for a broad anti-apartheid alliance to challenge the strategies of the state. With these decisions, the workers and their organisations demonstrated their belief that the strategic initiative still rests with the democratic movement.

COSATU emerged from the Special Congress a stronger organisation. Fears were expressed beforehand that the Congress might founder on the political differences between affiliates. But despite sometimes heated discussions, the final political resolution on alliances was a compromise hammered out between four affiliates and adopted unanimously. This represents a new level of political maturity in the federation.

The mood of the Congress was militant, and delegates obviously believed they had the support of their constituencies in calling for action. Contary to some newspaper reports, there was minimal support for "caution" or retreat. The debate around the three days of "peaceful national protest" centred on whether the protest should last for two days or three, and whether it should be linked to National Youth Day on June 16 or not.

It was highly significant that COSATU had invited "guests from the community" to attend the Congress. One hundred and twenty delegates from UDF affiliates, church and sports organisations attended with full speaking rights. This was a special provision, because the current political clampdown makes it extremely difficult for the democratic movement to assemble in any other way. The Congress was regarded as a forum for the country's democratic forces to assess the situation and agree on the way forward.

The masses provide direction

The Congress was dominated by the mood of the delegates, by their determination to take action and advance. They were coming from constituencies that had been deeply politicised by the struggles of 1984-7, and that had taken part in unprecedentedly widespread industrial action in 1987. They had mobilised demonstrations and protests against the Labour Bill, were deeply angered by the political restrictions on COSATU and the effective banning of UDF and 16 other democratic organisations. In many cases they had stayed away on Sharpeville Day.

The Congress was a forum for these delegates to come together nationally as a federation to decide the concrete steps for mobilising and resisting the attacks of the state. The shopfloor leadership was able to provide the direction and confidence that had been lacking before the Congress. One organiser offered the following explanation: "You have to draw a line between the activists and the masses. The officials see that we do not have good attendance in COSATU structures, that our campaigns have not been successful, and they conclude that it would be suicidal to advance. They say, let us strengthen our structures. That is true, but it is wrong to go further and say if we have problems we must retreat.

"At the same time the masses were speaking a different language. Despite three states of emergency, their industrial action had not stopped. Their struggles had not stopped. So the two groups were reading the situation from different angles. The masses were not

saying this by talking. Their actual actions showed that they were not talking about retreat, they were advancing."

Lack of direction in Cosatu?

But while there were signs of militancy and readiness for action on the ground, the key question was whether COSATU would be able to channel this mood in a united programme of action. There seemed to be a degree of indecision and lack of direction in the national leadership of the unions and the federation about how to respond to the Bill and the political restrictions. This was reflected in the decision of the Executive Committee to postpone the Congress by a month - a decision which drew angry flak from the leadership of COSATU locals at a national meeting a week later. Tension mounted, as some affiliates accused others of wanting to postpone action, and were in turn criticised for wanting to rush into action without a thorough assessment of the conditions. Some observers believed there would be a fundamental division between affiliates urging retreat and "survivalism" and affiliates calling for action and advance.

Discussing the balance of forces

Despite differences over how to assess the weaknesses and strengths of the state and of the democratic movement, almost all speakers stressed the point that the state lacked political direction, and that the oppressed people have the will and the organisation to go forward. The key task was to decide on a programme of action for guiding the advance. Speaker after speaker pointed to the political bankruptcy of the regime - "there is no government, we are governed by security councils, soldiers and martial law" (NUMSA); The presence of the military in the townships "shows that the state is weak. Caspirs are part of the township furniture. We say to Botha, let him bring in the navy, we will deal with it" (NUM); The fact that "the state cannot rule in the old ways, but nor does it have new ways" meant that the strategic initiative still lay with the democratic movement (SARHWU). "The democratic movement is still strong, the people's will to resist is unquestionable" (NUM).

Some speakers pointed out that "the state has a clear programme for advancing step by step" (T&GWU) and that "community structures have been weakened" (PPWAWU), but this simply meant the Congress needed to "come up with a clear programme to move forward" (T&GWU).

NUMSA pointed out that "there are divisions in the camp of the oppressor. People in Parliament speak to the ANC. The AWB is splitting to the right. The oppressors are losing confidence. Botha is also losing confidence. We must deepen these divisions. The state is not meeting the real grievances of the people, they are using security to eliminate the leaders of the community. The state is introducing new repression because of the strength of our resistance - this means we must strengthen our resistance and go further." SARHWU argued that it was necessary to advance, "otherwise the government will simply increase its attack. The conditions for resistance are still there, it is open for us to go forward. We cannot co-operate with the state-imposed restrictions."

To applause from the hall-full of delegates, CWIU pointed to weaknesses in the union movement. "We have failed to take action against the Bill - that is a weakness. We failed to support NUM and SARHWU in their struggles last year - that is a weakness. We have to overcome these weaknesses, we have to take action."

This point was taken up by a speaker from the community delegation: "Organisation is consolidated on the basis of struggle. Organisation is not built in an office and then afterwards launched into the struggle. It is built through struggle, so if we are not going to act against Botha, we cannot build organisation." The community speaker also introduced an important distinction into the discussion of the state: "The state is militarily strong, we cannot doubt that. But we are campaigning on the political terrain - where the state is weak. The state's weakness on this terrain is our strength."

Although there were differing emphases, the discussion during this session established substantial common ground between affiliates. The fact that there was so much common ground suggests that at the mass base of most of the unions the members hold a similar view of the situation in South Africa: that the mass democratic movement has by no means been defeated; that the state is politically weak though militarily strong; that the state's repressive measures must be resisted by all means; and that survival will be secured through decisive advance rather than retreat - that retreating would simply invite further attacks by the state.

Such an interpretation is supported by reports that shop stewards in some unions rejected suggestions by their officials that COSATU should adopt a more cautious approach.

New strategies, new tactics?

Before the Congress it had seemed that one of the major issues for debate would be whether it was time for the democratic movement to retreat and consolidate organisation. This was linked to the question whether the state is strong or weak: if the state is strong, the democratic movement should retreat; if weak, it should advance. However, this way of posing the problem is not very useful. Both the trade unions (in the 70s and 80s) and UDF (in 1983/4) made great advances when the state was strong. The more useful way of posing the problem is to ask, given a specific balance of forces at this time, what is the best way to advance?

By the time of the Congress most affiliates had reformulated the question. Virtually no-one was arguing that COSATU should retreat because it was weak and the state was strong. All but one affiliate argued the need for decisive action. All argued that the state lacked political direction.

However, there were different emphases. A NUMSA delegate believes that underlying this debate was a difference over tactics. NUMSA and other unions were arguing that although the state has suffered setbacks, it is still fundamentally very strong. Organisations should not automatically call for mass protests such as stayaways, said the delegate, but should also develop "fighting tactics" on the shopfloor. Alliances should be broadened to include all organisations of the oppressed and exploited, not just the dominant Charterists. There is a need to question the effectiveness of "protest politics" - stayaways, boycotts, non-participation.

The NUMSA delegate felt that unions such as SARHWU and NUM were arguing that the state is fundamentally weak because of the success of the strategies and tactics used by the democratic movement. They were, he felt, calling for an intensification of these tactics and strategies, rather than a reassessment.

It is true that SARHWU and NUM argued that the state has been fundamentally weakened by the mass resistance of the past few years. One discussion paper argued that "we have succeeded in smashing any illusions that the state may have about 'winning over' large sections of our people to support their reformist solutions. They have been forced to resort to 'naked force' to try and impose their solutions on our people."

But the discussion paper does not argue against new tactics: "Our level of support in most areas remains very high, and it's up to us to

find new ways of channelling this into new open mass struggles - as well as into other forms of organisation that can survive despite high levels of repression." A unionist and UDF activist from this grouping said, "Our critics do not understand the complexity of struggle against the state. We do not see the political struggles of the last few years as "protest politics". There was a period of mobilisation that led into a period of semi-insurrection and new forms of organisation, which inflicted enormous damage on the state. The result is that it has no coherent political strategy, it is isolated locally and internationally, it has no legitimacy. "On our part, the Congress movement has always been tactically flexible. We do believe organisations are currently developing a range of new tactics, but at the same time we see no need to abandon tactics that have been successful."

To the observer, the debate at the Congress produced a rich combination of old and new tactics. There was the call for three days of protest (old), to be combined with factory demonstrations (new). A range of powerful shopfloor tactics (new) were suggested by unions across the political spectrum - NUMSA, CCAWUSA, T&GWU, PPWAWU. The united front with COSATU's allies is to be strengthened (old), and a broad anti-apartheid conference convened (new). No doubt different affiliates will emphasise different tactics, but the interaction between different strategic and political viewpoints has been fruitful. The overall assessment of COSATU assistant general secretary Sydney Mafumadi is that "a composite position was achieved - that the state is strong, that it has reserves of power, but that it has its own weaknesses. Congress was unified on the need to engage those weaknesses so as to undermine its strength and drain its reserves."

Regrouping the democratic movement

The Congress succeeded in regrouping and unifying the democratic movement around a concrete programme for moving forward. This programme consisted of concrete mass action (the three day protest) and a longer term strategy of alliances based on action. The three day protest was seen as important for harnessing the anger of COSATU's membership as well as the community, and mobilising them for further sustained resistance to the Bill, the political restrictions, and general state strategy. The protest would demonstrate to liberals and the international community that repression had not succeeded in crushing the democratic movement,

and warn capital and the state of the anger of the people.

A number of delegates stressed that the protest should not be seen as a "once-off" action - action should be "continuous". A range of tactics were suggested for resisting the Labour Bill if it becomes law. Speakers also rejected the political restrictions on COSATU, and reaffirmed the political policies of the federation. The longer term programme to challenge Apartheid is contained in the resolution on alliances. There are several important points in this resolution. Firstly, it sums up the mood of the Congress by stating that "we have the capacity to seize the initiative".

Secondly, it resolves to convene a conference organising committee "comprising the COSATU CEC and its allies as defined in the political policy resolution." This committee will "consider proposals for the development of a programme of action and organisation against repression," as well as call a conference of a broad range of anti-apartheid organisations to further deliberate" on repression and action against it, and which would work "on the basis of democracy, disciplined mandates and free and open debate".

Thus the resolution contains both NUM's suggestion that an ongoing programme of action should be developed by COSATU and its proven allies (ie. the "democratic movement"), as well as the NUMSA/CWIU suggestion of calling a broad anti-Apartheid conference in order to broaden the base of resistance to Apartheid.

This process recognises the centrality of COSATU's united front with its "proven allies". Some observers have interpreted the resolution to mean that the united front has failed or been superceded, whereas the resolution places the united front at the core of a broad anti-Apartheid alliance.

The significance of the Congress

Some observers have suggested that the Congress showed that the trade union movement has become politically more important than the community organisations, the UDF, and so on. They suggest that it is now the trade union movement that is setting the direction. It is certainly true that the trade unions have got the legal space, the democratic structures, the organised constituency, and the power on the shopfloor, which community organisations lack at this point. However, it is difficult to make such a clear distinction between trade unions, community organisations and the liberation movement. Many of the trade unionists who spoke are also UDF and civic activists. Many shopstewards are active in street committees and

youth organisations. At least four speakers had spent periods on Robben Island for ANC activities. The political reference points in many slogans, songs and speeches are the organisations and personalities of the liberation movement. It is only through understanding these factors that one can explain why shopstewards participated in and organised the Sharpeville stayaway, despite a lack of mobilisation on the part of formal union structures.

There are differences though. One union delegate criticised the community delegation for taking a "partisan stand by strongly attacking the NUMSA/CWIU resolution. They should have let the unions debate thoroughly before putting their views. They should also have been open in admitting that state repression has seriously affected structures in the community." Despite these differences, with great unevenness and regional variation, trade union, community and political organisation are meshing into one movement. At the same time the significance of COSATU and its structures is that it is placing organised workers at the centre of decision-making and action in this movement.

One of the most important achievements of the COSATU Congress was the unity it achieved between affiliates with political differences. The common threats and problems faced by all workers and all affiliates no doubt contributed to the drive for unity. At the same time there is a new political maturity in the federation, a recognition that the costs of division are too high. It is also probably true that the mass political struggles since 1984 have heightened political consciousness, so that the sharp division between 'workerism' and 'populism' has given way for a more uniform political perspective in which most people agree on the need for alliances with the community, and for unions to take up political issues.

The road ahead

The Congress might well provide a turning point in resistance to apartheid. Mass militancy has been channelled into a concrete programme of action. The Congress deepened and strengthened the united front. At the same time, a broad anti- Apartheid conference could provide a massive boost to the anti- Apartheid movement by strengthening the unity of the opposition and further isolating and discrediting the government and its reforms. If successful, these initiatives could resolve the current stalemate in favour of the democratic movement. (FROM SALB REPORT: JULY 1988)