

# THE GIANT GROWS

## Cosatu's Resolutions on Women

"A giant is born!" These words welcomed the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) when it was formed in 1985. The COSATU Congress in Johannesburg in July 1989 saw the spirit of this giant as it grows in strength. 1800 workers and officials from unions affiliated to COSATU attended this Congress. It was the biggest Congress ever held. There was a fighting spirit. And for most of the time there was a strong feeling of unity. The unions mean business in their fight against the oppressive labour laws and apartheid.

There was not always unity on the issue of women's oppression. There was much discussion, and some very hot debate on the resolutions on women. And one resolution on women's oppression did not get passed because the Congress could not agree on it. But even so, as Dorothy Mokgalo, a shopsteward from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), told us: "The resolutions are a step forward. Putting women's resolutions forward creates an awareness. It means everybody will see the need to realise that women are part of the working class."

### **End to Sexist Language**

One of the first things that the Congress agreed to do was to put an end to sexist language in the COSATU constitution. The constitution talked about men instead of people, and gave the idea that COSATU was only about men. The change means that words like 'chairman' will no longer be used. They will use 'chairperson'. And this will make it clear that women too can be in the leadership of COSATU.

### **National Women's Organisation**

The one resolution agreed upon with little debate was on the need for a national women's organisation. Jerry Najatladi, who is from the National Union of Mineworkers told us: "Women thus far are in small pockets of women's organisations. We need to build a national women's organisation."

The Congress decided that the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) should be revived, and that COSATU would help with the revival of FEDSAW. FEDSAW was active in the 1950's in organising women in the fight against apartheid.

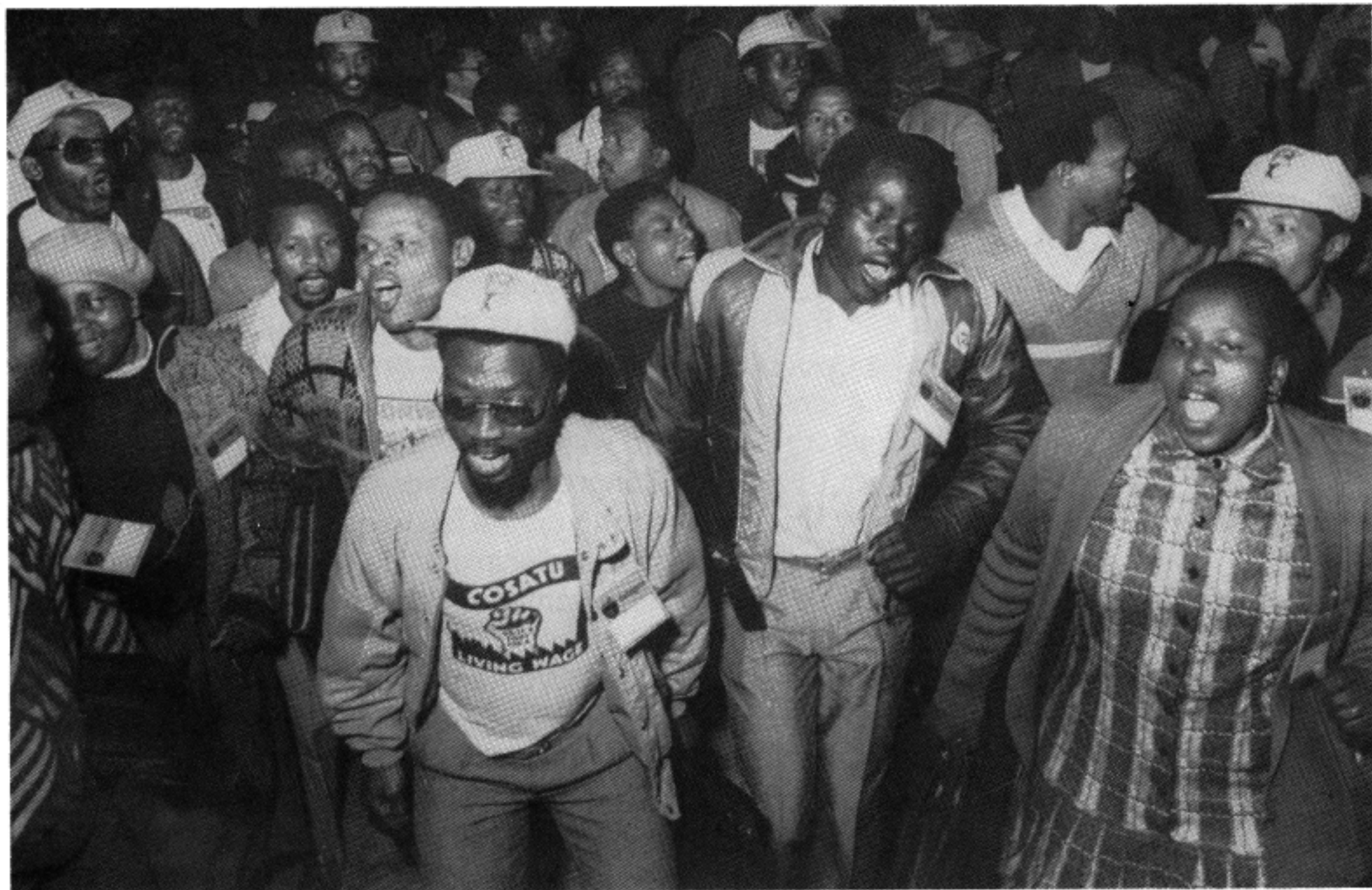
### Women and Leadership

Another important problem was raised in the resolution on women and leadership. The resolution said that there are very few women organisers and very few women leaders in the factories, in the unions and in COSATU itself.

Jane Barrett, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), and Dorothy Mogkalo of NUMSA told us why this was an important issue to discuss. Jane said: "It is not just at a senior level that we need women leadership. We need it at the factory level. People think that men are better than women. Or that women are not eligible. We need to make sure that

there are women at all levels of leadership. Even where there are a large number of women workers you find most of the organisers are men."

Dorothy felt that the problem was with the attitudes of men and women. She said: "It is not because women aren't wanting to or are not able to take up leadership. Women have got that capability to do the job. Women can do it. The problems we face especially are with the custom. We believe men are always above. It is a problem of attitude, not skill. There is nothing we can't do as women." But not all women at the Congress agreed on the problems and solutions to women's leadership. There was a lot of discussion on this. Jane said: "There was an angry response from those in favour of the resolution. It was the first time at the Congress that women really spoke out. Woman after woman spoke for and against. Some said that women are not ready to be elected to leadership positions. That women



Photograph by Cedric Nunn, Afrapix

It was the biggest Congress ever. The mood was militant and strong. July 1989.



Photograph by Gill de Vlieg, Afrapix

**The Congress decided that the idea should be spread that men should share the housework.**

need special education before they can be elected into the leadership. Others said: "How can you say women need special education - men don't need special education!" But in the end the Congress agreed that women's leadership must be advanced immediately. The Congress decided that unions must make sure that women workers are elected as shopstewards on the factory floor, and into leadership at all levels.

### **Fight the Things That Stand in Women's Way**

It was decided that the things which stand in the way of women being in leadership must be fought. These things are lack of childcare, the double burden caused by housework, and meetings that end late at night. The Congress decided that unions should provide childcare at meetings where it is needed. They will also assist to transport women comrades home when meetings end late and where it is dangerous for them to take public transport.

And the Congress decided that the idea should be spread that housework should be shared between men and women.

### **Sexual Conduct**

The resolution that caused the hottest and longest discussion was the resolution on sexual conduct put forward by TGWU. The debate lasted for four hours. And this was one of the only resolutions put to the Congress that was not agreed to. But even though the resolution was not passed, Jane from TGWU felt that it had raised an important issue. And it had started a debate in COSATU.

### **The Personal Is Political**

The resolution raised the problem that it often happens that male comrades in unions use their position in the union to get involved in casual relationships with younger women who are new to the union. And when these unequal relationships end, the women often drop out of the organisation. And sometimes divisions in the union start. This is seen as a problem, as women are not taken seriously as activists and comrades. The resolution also said that there have been many incidents of sexual harassment of women comrades by male comrades in the unions. The resolution called for more discipline from men in the organisation.

Jane told us that the resolution was put forward because of problems that they had experienced in their union. She said: "When we were planning the resolutions to take to Congress, the president of our union felt very strong on the issue of sexual harassment and sexual discipline. He spoke of the problem of new women recruits who often get involved in relationships with more senior men in the union. Women were being exploited in these relationships. When the relationship ended, women would leave the union, and stop being active. He said this was a regular pattern that he saw happening. This report led to discussion. And it was clear that male organisers were also using their position with new women recruits. It was happening in

other unions. All of this inspired the resolution on sexual conduct. People were saying: 'the personal is political.'"

### **Men Need Education**

The discussion on this resolution shows clearly the need for more discussion and education on the problems of sexism, sexual harassment and the power men have over women in our society. It also shows that most men and women at the Congress were not ready to accept that these things are really happening.

Some felt the resolution should never have been brought to Congress. Others felt that oppression of women is a reality, like racism, and needs to be tackled head-on. The resolution did not get enough support or agreement from the Congress. Congress decided to refer the question of sexual conduct for further discussion, and to include this in the COSATU code of conduct that unions are working on. The code of conduct deals with how an activist should behave in all aspects of life.

### **The Road Ahead**

The resolutions passed are so far just on paper. It was decided that a women's sub-committee under the National Education Committee (NEDCOM) of COSATU would be set up. It would check the progress and co-ordinate putting the resolutions on national organisation and leadership into action. This is a big step forward, as COSATU now has a committee that is responsible for taking women's struggles forward and for making sure women do play a bigger part in the unions.

But what about the resolution that did not get passed? Will attitudes to the sexual harassment of women comrades by men comrades change?

Jane said: "The positive thing is that the issue has been raised, and that the debate will continue. I have faith that consciousness will change. The debate at the Congress was

alive. The issue will be pursued through the code of conduct."

Dorothy also feels positive. She felt that men must be educated to support and respect women. And she felt sure that attitudes towards women will change in time. She said: "The spirit of the Congress was that everybody is prepared to take the struggle forward. We are not prepared to retard the struggle."

### **The Future Lies in the Hands of Women and Men in COSATU.**

There is still a long road to travel before the unions are united and strong in the fight against sexism and women's oppression. The discussion at the Congress shows this clearly. But it is a start that more resolutions were brought by unions on women than ever before. And it is a start that these issues were discussed. What lies ahead is the task of building on all of this, to make sure that women's oppression is taken up as seriously as the fight against the bosses and apartheid.●



Photograph by Anna Zieminski

**The women's resolutions have raised many issues that hold women workers back. Now is the time to move forward!**