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Responsible: erwin.schweisshelm@fes.de



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**Consolidating working class power for quality jobs
COSATU's 8th National Congress**

16 – 19 September 2003, Midrand

Werner Rechmann, FES South Africa

**„We recognise that the challenges facing shopstewards and organisers have intensified..... far-reaching restructuring processes place huge technical and organisational burdens on unions trying to defend the workers affected.”
Said COSATU President Willi Madisha, at the opening of the 8th national congress, held on 16 – 19 September 2003, in Midrand.**

Madisha's point was highlighting the complex challenges faced by trade unions as they pursue social transformation and the social dimension of restructuring, both nationally and internationally. This point was to lay basis for intense deliberations around the organizational requirements of strengthening the trade union movement and its allies, in order to succeed in efforts to achieve social justice (or a better life for all, as the South Africans would fondly say).

The congress was addressed by about 2500 delegates and guests. It was addressed by State President Thabo Mbeki, Deputy President Jacob Zuma, former President Nelson Mandela, ICFTU General Secretary Guy Ryder and the OATUU General Secretary, Hassan Sunmonu.

The congress took stock of the first ten years of freedom and democracy in South Africa and agreed on a medium-term programme to deepen transformation and advance the interests of workers and the poor, in what is increasingly criticized as an elite transition by some analysts.

This brief report will summarise the key outcomes of the congress, based on deliberations which centred around the short- to medium-term programme (programme 2015).

The political and economic context of the COSATU programme:

COSATU recognises important advances made by the ANC government since the establishment of democracy in 1994. Laws and institutions to advance political and social rights have been instituted, while important social and economic opportunities and services have been extended to black people. As a result they have benefited from laws prohibiting discrimination and extending government services to poor communities. Furthermore, workers have benefited from laws that improved basic conditions of employment and ensured access to education and skills development

The union notes also that government's adoption of a pro-market macro-economic policy had served to undermine the above-listed gains. Since the adoption of this policy, unemployment has risen sharply (it stands now at 42 %), incomes for the poor have fallen sharply and many poor families have experienced cut-offs in electricity, water and telephones. Economic growth rates and investment levels remain very

low, leaving in their trail massive job losses.

Structurally, the economy still remains in white hands centred in the mining and finance sector.

The union body notes that the economic restructuring that has taken place has strengthened existing economic power relations, opened opportunities for only a small black elite and drove the majority into the formal sector.

The union argues that no further gains for the majority of the people, who are poor, can be made without deep and significant transformation in the economy. It asserts that for such change to occur, the state machinery remains an important lever, as are strong organs of civil society, including trade unions. COSATU believes that such fundamental change will require a clear vision and programme to realize, and has therefore decided on a range of targets in the political, socio-economic, organizational and international sphere – constituting the pillars of the 2015 programme. (COSATU will be celebrating 30 years in 2015.)

Key pillars of the COSATU 2015 programme

Political pillar

Congress recognizes advances made in instituting representative and elements of participatory democracy; the creation of a single state machinery as well as the establishment of integrated and non-racial municipalities.

To deepen democracy, congress agreed on the following measures:

- Call for a mixed electoral system at national, provincial and local level, that will combine constituency-based (to be 65 %) with propor-

tional (to be 35 %) representation system.

- To continue with the coalition between COSATU, ANC and SACP, and to strive for a decisive ANC victory in the national and provincial elections coming next year.
- Defend and transform the public sector, especially its role in basic service delivery, and therefore resist efforts to privatize services and state enterprises.
- Develop capacity to influence policy and legislative processes at national, provincial, local and sectoral level.
- To proceed with the collaboration with the ANC

Socio-Economic pillar

Congress identified the defence and creation of quality jobs as an issue of critical importance. Furthermore, delegates endorsed an approach to economic transformation that will empower the majority of the people who are poor and were previously disadvantaged. Measures to advance such concept of transformation and achieve creation of quality jobs, will include:

- Legislative and other measures to support co-operatives, land reform, infrastructure rollout for the benefit of the poor
- Involvement of labour and the community constituencies in developing the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) charters and programmes. Congress rejected the dominant BEE concept which favours the black elite.
- To pursue the above positions, COSATU will engage with government and employers at various levels.

International pillar

Congress accused globalization, in its current format, for deepening poverty and inequalities. Furthermore, congress sees

the domination of the US and its persisting disregard for multilateral institutions as impacting negatively on efforts to attain a just and equitable world order. Congress noted the continuing violation of human and labour rights in Zimbabwe and Swaziland. It adopted a range of measures to advance international solidarity and the struggle for a just world order.

- COSATU sees its main contribution in international solidarity in assisting to build a vibrant labour movement in Africa, that is linked to the global trade union movement. In this regard, COSATU and its affiliates will enter into comprehensive technical and political co-operation programmes, with unions in Zimbabwe and Swaziland, to share political, organizational and other experiences.
- The union body will develop proposals on a global transformation agenda which will address such issues as trade, development and international financial institutions.
- Congress expressed support for efforts of the peoples of Zimbabwe, Swaziland, Palestine, Cuba, Burma and Iraq, to attain peace, self-determination and respect of human and workers rights.

Organisational pillar

Success and progress in achieving the programme 2015 will only be realised with unions acting in concert with other progressive organisations and when unions build the requisite strength to mobilize and engage around its claims. COSATU's organizational pillar will aim for, among others, numerical strength, internal democracy, policy engagement capacity and efficient organizational management, through the following actions:

- A recruitment drive to increase membership by 10 % every year
- Develop creative approaches to target specific layers and strata of workers like youth, woman, mi-

grant workers, casual and part-time workers and other workers in unorganized sectors.

- Strong support for shopstewards
- Better financial and human resources management in the unions
- Take steps towards unity with the other 3 federations, to achieve the objective of one-federation-in-one-country by 2006

Elections

Elections of the national COSATU leaders were held during the congress. Almost all the COSATU national leaders were returned unopposed to office, with the exception of the second vice-President position which was close but successfully contested by Violet Sebone.

President: Willie Madisha (President of SADTU, the teachers union)

First vice-President: Joe Nkosi (from NUM, the mineworkers)

Second vice-President: Violet Sebone (from SACTWU, the textile union)

General Sekretary: Zwelinzima Vavi

Deputy General Secretary: Bheki Ntshalintshali (former COSATU and the chemical union official)

Treasurer: Alinah Rantsolase (from the commercial and catering union)

Conclusion

The above programme is certainly ambitious and still pretty much of a framework, requiring more elaboration and refining in the executive committee. Deli

berating around a short-/medium-term programme with strong organizational focus, instead of traditional resolution-based congress deliberations, was a commendable shift. Refining and resourcing of the programme, as well as co-operative, disciplined and monitored implementation will be challenging, but vital pre-requisites of attaining the objectives of the union.

Failing in this momentous project will without doubt drive COSATU into the worst case scenario – of rapid decline in membership, loss of influence and failure to arrest transformation from the current conservative accumulation path.

The COSATU congress was no doubt an exciting event, with open and lively debates. It had its fair share of controversy, especially with repeated attempts by the media to either misrepresent or blow issues out of proportion, especially issues relating to the relationship between COSATU and the ANC. The rigorous debating confirmed to some degree the ability of COSATU to assert its independence under most difficult circumstances. The dominance of the ANC in the coalition (ANC, COSATU, SACP) will however remain.

Economic liberalization, plans for partial privatization from the government's side and their effects increasingly undercut the support base of unions und reduce their ability to influence the restructuring process. This reality in mind and with regard to the upcoming elections in which the ANC will need the support of COSATU president Mbeki offered the support of the ANC to COSATU in return.

Erwin Schweisshelm, Tel: 0228/883-518; e-mail: Erwin.Schweisshelm@fes.de (verantwortlich)

Lisette Klöppel, Tel. 0228/883-517, e-mail: Lisette.Kloepfel@fes.de.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Internationale Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, Globale Gewerkschaftspolitik

Division for International Cooperation, Global Trade Union Program

Godesberger Allee 149, 53175 Bonn

Fax 0228/883-575

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