

NACTU Congress: change of direction?

By EDDIE KOCH

When South Africa's biggest trade union federation, COSATU, was launched in December 1985, a smaller - but significant - group of unions stayed away from the festivities at Kings Park in Durban.

The main reason these unions gave for not joining the new super-federation was that they believed in the principle of "black working class leadership". They were not prepared to accept the non-racial ideas which allowed large numbers of white officials to work in the leadership ranks of COSATU.

These unions went on to form the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU). Three years later, at its annual congress held in August 1988, NACTU decided to drop the controversial principle and replace it with the concept of "African working class leadership".

The change may seem to be playing with words. But, in fact, it was the signal for far deeper changes in NACTU policy which have in-

creased the chances for cooperation between the country's two biggest trade union federations.

The role of whites

One of the major resolutions that NACTU had planned to put on the table at the congress was a statement of support for the all-white End Conscription Campaign (ECC). The banning of the organisation just before the congress made it legally impossible for NACTU to do this - but it is clear that members of the federation were thinking again about the role of whites in the struggle for a free country.

Pamphlets handed out at the congress also outlined an "Africanist" philosophy. The pamphlets made it clear that whites who identify with the future of the African continent can be included in the leadership of organisations fighting for a new order.

Under the heading "*Who are the Africanists?*", the pamphlet argued that "in occupied Azania the oppressed and the exploited masses are not oppressed and dispossessed because of their race or colour. The oppressed, exploited and dispossessed are in chains because of the economic interests of those who oppress and exploit them."

From black consciousness to Africanism

The change in term from "black" to "African", the planned resolution

on the ECC, and the ideas expressed in the pamphlet on Africanism, were clear indications that NACTU was reconsidering the founding principle which had been the major obstacle to greater unity with COSATU.

The congress voted out of NACTU's leadership the most hard-line supporter of black consciousness ideas, which voting in a leadership was united in its desire for closer co-operation with COSATU. James Mndaweni was re-

Many of these leaders come from an Africanist tradition and share its more flexible position on the issue of whites being in the leadership of trade unions and other extra-parliamentary organisations.

However the congress stressed and reaffirmed NACTU's founding principle of non-affiliation to any political organisation. At an interview with the *Labour Bulletin* after the congress, members of the new executive stressed that people of all political persuasions were able to become



Camay, Mndaweni and enthusiastic supporters

Photo: NACTU

elected president, Patricia de Lille became vice-president, Piroshaw Camay kept his position as general secretary, Cunningham Ngcukana replaced Phandelani Nefolovhodwe as first assistant general secretary, and Mahlomola Skhosana kept his seat as second assistant general secretary.

members of NACTU unions. They insisted that the leadership would not use the federation as a vehicle to promote the ideas of Africanism over other political ideas. Mahlomola Skhosana said such tolerance of different political ideas within the organisation could also be an

example that would help make democracy effective in post-liberation society.

The congress took a tough line on ensuring that member unions report accurate membership figures and

pay their affiliation fees to the federation on the basis of these figures. Mndaweni told *Labour Bulletin* that this was done to prevent members from claiming large memberships and paying for these just before the congress, and then paying for much smaller numbers after the congress had ended.

Drop in NACTU's membership figures?

The result was that NACTU's official figures showed a signed-up membership of less than 150,000. Official membership of the Black Allied Mining and Construction Workers' Union, for example, plummeted from 148,000 in October 1986 to a mere 3,100 in June this year. The figures for the Steel Engineering and Allied Workers' Union (SEAWUSA) showed a drop from 27,000 to 5,500 for the same period. The Transport and Allied Workers' Union (TAWU)



Delegates at the congress get into the swing of things

Photo: NACTU

had its official membership halved from 10,000 to 5,000, and figures for the Vukani Guards and Allied Workers Union were slashed from 8,900 to 2,000.

The stronger unions in the federation are the SA Chemical Workers Union with 30,000 members, the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union with 22,000 members and the Food and Beverage Workers Union with 18,000 members.

Ngcukana stressed, however, that these strict figures did not reflect the actual strength of NACTU's member unions, and said the federation was thinking of producing another set of figures to indicate paid-up membership. He said NACTU had an actual paid-up membership of 300,000 and that it has a signed-up membership of 450,000 to half-a-million.

TAWU, for example, had close to 16,000 paid-up members even though it was only paying the federation for 5,000 members. SEAWUSA had 25 to 30,000 paid up members although its official numbers were recorded as 5,500, and the Food and Beverage Workers' Union had 18,000 paid-up members, said Ngcukana.

Although the method of calculating membership has obviously produced a figure below NACTU's actual strength, the numbers do point to another serious problem within NACTU. The federation's fairly small membership is scattered across 24 affiliates and some unions such as the Black Domestic Workers' Union and Textile Workers' Union have official membership figures of just a few hundred. NACTU also has five different affiliates in the metal and motor industry.

Resolution on democracy

For reasons such as these, another major resolution at the congress urged all affiliates to merge into bigger industrial unions.

Delegates to the congress also noted that there were no women in NACTU's leadership and this discussion led to the election of Patricia de Lille as vice-president.

Camay said the congress had also discussed the need to strengthen the influence that rank-and-file members have over all of the federation's structures. "It was decided that two-thirds of delegations to all structures of the federation must consist of workers and the remaining one-third may consist of union officials. If this is not complied with the delegation will not receive voting rights." ☆



NACTU responds

NACTU office-bearers do not believe our article is an accurate reflection of their position. They have written the following response.

It is incorrect to say that organisations that do not allow people of European descent are not non-racial. Non-racialism does not mean acceptance of whites in organisations. It is a belief that the theory of race is a myth and that there is only one human race. NACTU was non-racial right from its inception. No organisation of the oppressed and exploited has ever organised on the basis of race. The organisations of the oppressed and ex-

exploited organise on the basis of the material conditions prevalent.

Role of whites

The congress of NACTU never discussed the role of whites. It is surprising to find that people go about writing about what was never discussed. Certainly there was a resolution on ECC which says nothing of the role of whites.

From black consciousness to Africanism

NACTU has never been a Black Consciousness Federation from its inception, and the change from Black to African does not mean that NACTU is an Africanist Federation. There is a clear difference between an African and Africanist.

Election of NACTU officials is not done on the basis of their political affiliation, but on their capability and democratic support of our members.

Whilst certain individuals of the NACTU leadership may hold certain political beliefs it does not mean that it is a NACTU position. All office-bearers of NACTU are expected to act professionally and to play a unifying role.

Drop in NACTU members?

The membership figures paid by unions and reflected at congress are not the true figures. This issue was debated at our congress and the reasons

highlighted were the following:

- Some of our unions have no stop-order facilities. It becomes difficult for them to collect membership dues directly from a large membership, for example, BAMCWU, NUPSW and MWASA. These unions are remedying the situation. For example, MWASA and NUPSW have applied for registration.
- The second reason is that our affiliates have received little or no direct international funding, making them depend almost only on subscriptions. These subscriptions are even sometimes used for relief of striking workers, legal fees, etc. This results in unions paying only for part of their membership.

This issue was highly interrogated at congress, and unions committed themselves to paying for the correct membership despite the financial strain it may cause them.

NACTU will definitely produce a proper membership statistic early in 1989, which we are certain to be between 250,000 and 300,000.

In certain unions we have proof that paid up membership is above what they pay to NACTU. For example, Textile Workers Union pays for only 400 workers but has 415 paid-up members in Pietermaritzburg alone, notwithstanding those who directly pay to the offices. ☆