

Placing women's issues on the agenda has been a long battle. Cosatu women have taken to the streets and engaged in fierce debates around the question since the formation of the federation. And the debate continues ...

Cosatu unions differ in their approaches to organising women. Where women form the majority, they see no need for having separate women's committees. A programme on gender issues is taken up through union structures.

Where women are a minority women's committees ensure that gender issues and a programme for organising women do get onto the agenda of union structures.

However, all are agreed on the need for affirmative action. The debate centres on what is the most effective strategy to address gender equality in the workplace, in society and in our own organisations.

PARENTAL RIGHTS

In negotiations unions have moved from maternity rights to parental rights. Important issues relating to maternity rights have been raised in collective bargaining.

A survey completed by the women's sub-committee on maternity rights shows unevenness in agreements reached. The majority of Cosatu unions have won agreements with companies for six months paid maternity leave and a guarantee of job security.

The survey also showed that unions were shifting increasingly towards a perspective on paternal rights and the demands on childcare (as indicated in the box).

Union campaigns have led to a number of negotiations with companies (particularly in TGWU and Saccawu). Numsa's auto sector in the Eastern Cape recently persuaded employers to contribute a levy for the creation of community creches in the Eastern Cape.

Affirmative action: how Cosatu does it

Rahmat Omar, Education Researcher in Cosatu, outlines the federation's experience in affirmative action for women.

Some recent developments

- April 1990: Cosatu women marched to government offices in Johannesburg in support of Cosatu demands on the Labour Relations Act. Focussed particularly on rights for domestic, public sector and farm workers where the majority are women.
- 20 September 1990: Workers countrywide observed Cosatu's National Day of Action on Childcare. Initiated by the women's sub-committee, both men and women were involved in demanding childcare and parental rights. The slogan "Workers are Parents Too" emphasised that childcare is not only a "women's issue" but an issue for all parents. Also that childcare is a social responsibility which employers have an obligation to support.
- October 1990: The draft Workers Charter contains specific focus on the rights of women workers.
- July, 1991: The Cosatu Fourth National Congress adopted the principle of affirmative action and agreed that a full-time gender co-ordinator should be employed. His/her task would be to consolidate and expand Cosatu's programme for organising women and addressing gender inequalities.

The discussion in the Goods and Services Commission covers Cosatu proposals on policy relating to social security and welfare issues. It includes thorough discussions on future policies on childcare in the long term - on ex-

isting international standards - and in the short term on guidelines for negotiations with employers on childcare and parental rights.

Though unions have tried to break the assumption that child-

care is a women's issue, unions negotiations with employers still centred around the rights of women as mothers. This restricted view of women's rights was challenged strongly. It led to a focus on the Living Wage Campaign on the rights of women as workers.

The majority of women are breadwinners whose income supports entire families. The myth that women are working for "pocket money" (or for an income that is supplementary to the man's income) was challenged and the justification for paying women lower wages was rejected.

Unions therefore started taking up the demand for the removal of racial and sex discrimination in wages. But the battle was not to be won easily. In the chemical industry for example employers responded by simply re-grading the jobs of black women workers onto a lower grade and lower pay scale.

POLITICAL RIGHTS

Discussions about the position of women and women workers in a new Constitution for South Africa and in the Workers' Charter have been taken up actively.

The relationship between Cosatu women's structures and the ANC Women's League is now being defined within the guidelines of the Tripartite Alliance and joint action is on the agenda around campaigns such as the development of the Women's Charter.

Union leadership, especially at national level, is still male dominated, even in unions where women are in the overwhelming

majority. In Cosatu, women constitute about 36% of our total membership but only one Cosatu regional office bearer (out of 36) is a woman. In affiliates there has been some improvement in that union congresses in 1991 have elected women into national leadership positions (TGWU, Saccawu, Fawu).



ANC Women's League general secretary Baleka Kgositsile at a Sadwu picket in Johannesburg

Cosatu believes that any strategy to overcome gender inequality in South Africa has to start with a recognition of racial and class inequalities. But that recognition should not obscure the very real inequalities between men and women and the problem all over the world that power, decision-making and control is dominated by males.

Cosatu's 1991 Congress com-

mitted the federation to a conscious programme of developing women's skills. The extent to which this can be implemented depends largely on the extent to which women are able to organise themselves around such a programme.

TOKENISM?

In South Africa, as elsewhere, affirmative action has often been dismissed as tokenism. It has been easier for the government and employers to draw individuals, irrespective of their qualifications and potential, in order to strike "the right balance" in terms of race or gender. That certainly is tokenism and often the individual cannot perform adequately or efficiently. This is then used to justify the argument that blacks/women are incompetent.

Affirmative action policies undertaken by a democratic government and mass organisations have clearly to be distinguished from tokenism. They do not only focus on individual advancement, but primarily address themselves to the emancipation and advancement of all those social layers who have been "disadvantaged" under apartheid. This is obvious (or ought to be) in a society where the "disadvantaged" constitute the overwhelming majority of the population.

Thus affirmative action in South Africa (unlike America where the term originates) is part of a comprehensive strategy to bring about a fundamental transformation in the material inequalities (social and economic) and power relations which we have inherited from apartheid. ♦