

ORGANISED LABOUR/Sakhela Buhlungu and Andries Bezuidenhout

Between the congress and the coalface: join the dots

FOR an entire week in September, journalists, analysts, commentators, politicians and business people debated the role of the labour movement, and collectively held their breath in anticipation of the final outcome of the presidential elections at the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (Cosatu's) ninth national congress. The political posturing we witnessed tells us very little about the pressures workers and their unions face on the ground.

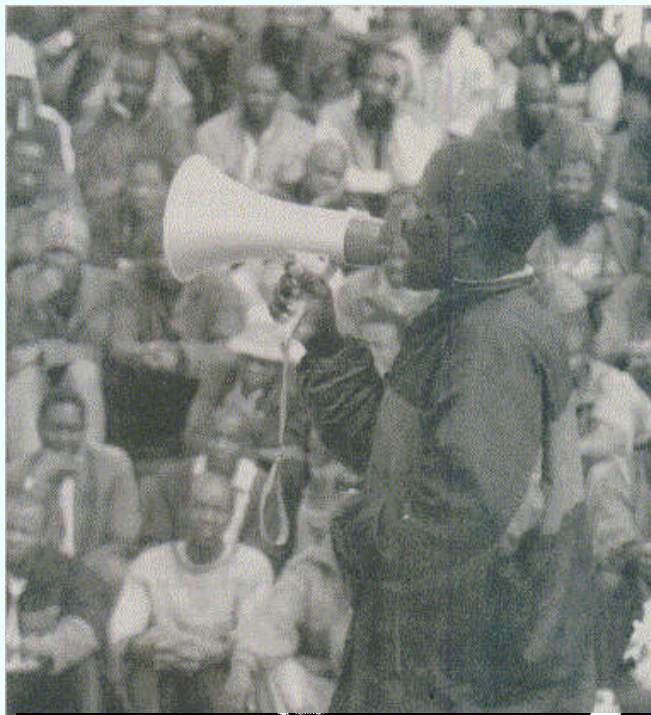
While politics and so-called succession battles are good for headlines, a research project we conducted recently among members of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) illustrates vividly some of these more concrete pressures.

Union leaders are not insulated from processes of rapid social change in the broader society. Consequently, the resurgence of ethnic identification in politics, and tensions around gender, are also present in the unions. Indeed, all the drama at the national level also plays out at the very base of Cosatu — the branches of its affiliates.

NUM remains the largest and most influential of Cosatu's affiliates. Founded in 1982, it is the largest single trade union in the history of SA and its success in pushing back the frontier of despotic control in the mining industry is a monument to the struggles of thousands of black mineworkers.

NUM did not only improve the wages and working conditions of hundreds of thousands of mineworkers, it also produced some of the most prominent political and business leaders of contemporary SA. These include politician-turned-businessman Cyril Ramaphosa and ANC secretary-general Kgalema Motlanthe. Both are past general secretaries of NUM. Others include business leaders such as James Motlatsi, as well as Marcel Golding and Paul Nkuna. Gwede Mantashe, a former miner and past general secretary, is now a senior banker attached to the Development Bank of Southern Africa. Zwelinzima Vavi, Cosatu's general secretary, is also a former miner and NUM member.

In addition, scores of black min-



Jeffrey Mgayo, chairman of National Union of Mineworkers Tau Tona branch, addressing members in the Carletonville area, August 2005.

Picture: SUNDAY TIMES

ers rose through the ranks to become important leaders of the union. In the period since 1994, many NUM shaft stewards and full-time officials moved on to play leading roles in the workplace as foremen and managers. Many others became local government councillors and some even mayors.

In a nutshell, NUM has played a leading role in shaping the transition in the spheres of the workplace, communities, politics and even business. However, in turn, the union has also been impacted upon by the transition of the past decade.

Democracy has brought opportunities to entrench gains made during the liberation struggle, but it has also presented the labour movement with a paradox. Measures put in place to bring about transformation and redress also tend to weaken union capacity to bring about those changes. One aspect of the paradox is the impact of the social mobility

of union members on the union itself. NUM was the first union to win the right to have full-time elected workplace representatives — shaft stewards. When mineworkers are elected to these positions, their salaries more than double, and their social status improves accordingly. Where these reps were victimised in the past, mining companies now recruit managers from this layer. In some cases, these shaft stewards are in a position to dispense patronage, and collude with company officials to sell jobs to desperate unemployed people. Thus, some of the most fierce succession battles occur at the very base of the union — its branches. Some of these succession battles turn violent, and are sometimes expressed as ethnic rivalry.

Another aspect of the paradox is that new forms of employment are undermining union membership and solidarity. In 2005, an average of 122 536 mineworkers were employ-

ed through outside contractors, a figure which represents 28% of the 444 362 workers employed in the industry. The figures in platinum mining, the growth sector, are even more staggering, at 36% of employment in the sector. Workers employed by contractors are almost impossible to unionise and are paid lower wages, and often cannot assert their health and safety rights.

A recent development in the mining industry is the entry of women as underground mineworkers. This has introduced tensions for the traditionally male-dominated union. Women earn less than men, have limited access to training, and underground facilities do not take their needs into account. There is also the issue of sexual harassment by men, which presents the union with enormous challenges.

NUM's campaigns against single-sex hostels have also paid off. The mining compound is no longer the sole centre of union activity today. Many workers have moved out of the compounds and now live in informal settlements or in townships with their families or friends. As a result, the task of mobilising workers is no longer a simple matter of getting every worker out of their dormitory and to the stadium.

How do these elements of the paradox of victory help us understand what happened at the Cosatu congress? While unions need to maintain their political relevance, such engagement has to be premised on maintaining organisational strength. Cosatu is still a powerful actor. However, in order to maintain political influence it has to ensure it derives that strength from strong unions and branches.

These branches more than reflect the national dynamics. They form the bedrock of our experiments with democracy. Should these experiments fail, the heated voices we heard during the congress will be just hot air, and Cosatu may not be around for much longer as a significant national actor.

■ *Buhlungu and Bezuidenhout work for the Sociology of Work Unit at Wits University. This article is based on a chapter that appears in State of the Nation: South Africa 2007 (HSRC Press).*

