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South Africa

Uniting South Africa with the rest of Africa

Nationalisation Unlikely – COSATU

AFRICA IS NOW!

Sdumo Dlamini, President of Cosatu, has confirmed to NAA, that his organization will be developing working relationships with trade unions in other African states.

But the lean towards nationalisation that featured last issue, has lost some of its momentum. Dlamini says that whilst Cosatu is pleased that the ruling party, the ANC, has agreed to debate and research nationalisation issues over the next two years, it has rethought its former position: 'We

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'Who knows, after all the studies, we may all come back and say maybe it would change the course of things if we were to nationalise only one big mine or one big state bank, co-existing with other commercial ventures. So while Cosatu supports nationalisation it is not in the demagogic way that some of our other comrades have been pronouncing.' He adds.

Dlamini instead shifted focus towards international cooperation with other African trade unions: 'It is our responsibility,' he says, 'to help

with the struggle of workers in the sub-Saharan region, Africa and the world as a whole. We are already involved with trade unions in Zimbabwe and Swaziland, and we are currently working with the Nigerian Labour Congress, whose membership is far bigger than Cosatu. We are also working with the Palestinians, the Ghanaian Trade Union Congress and soon, Kenya's COTU.'

It is the migration of unemployed people from other nations into South Africa that may have prompted Cosatu to take an interest in activities outside of its country. Dlamini insists that Cosatu has had to consider the

dampener that the economic crisis has placed upon the speed of recovery. 'We are concerned about the region because there are war's in some African countries that impact on South Africa's economy. People run from war-torn environments and this puts a strain on the attempts we make to push ahead.'

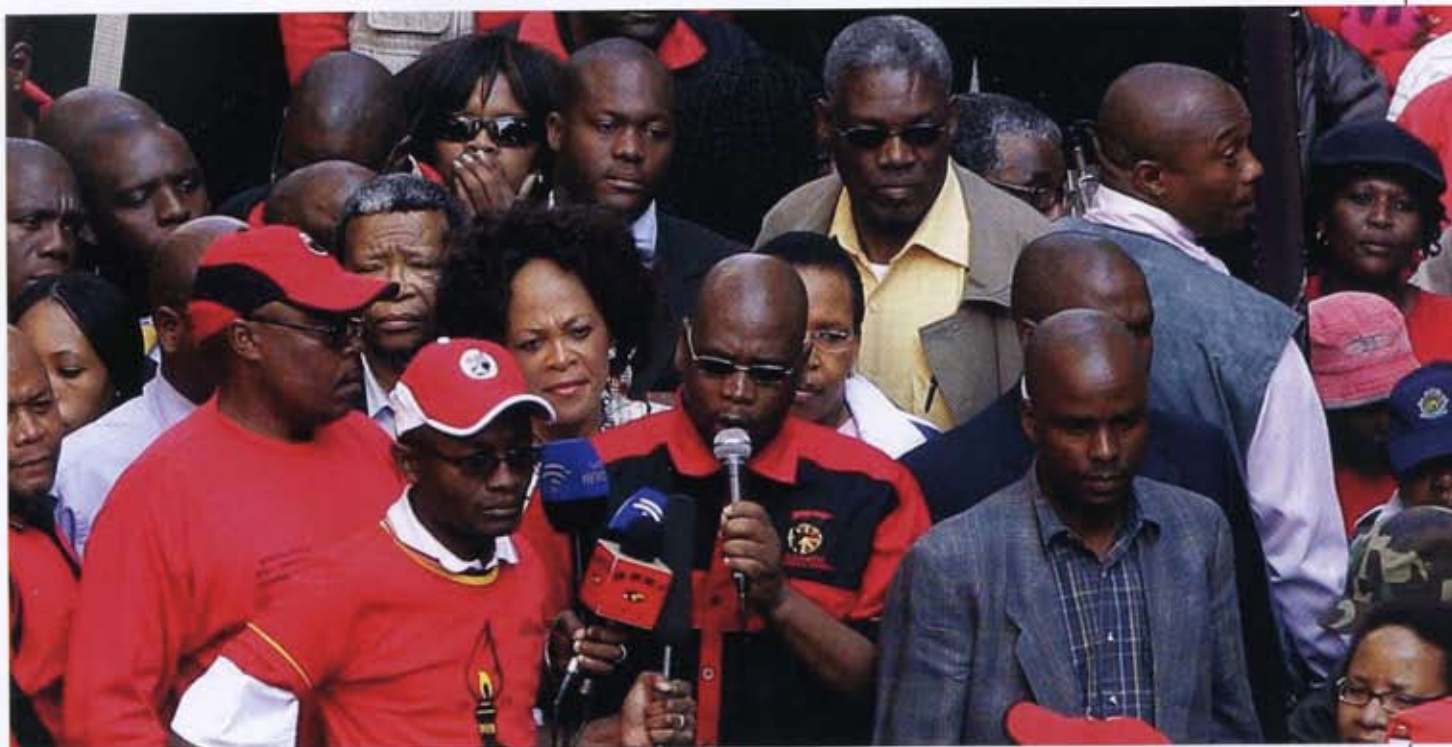
'We have a responsibility therefore, to ensure that there is stability in neighbouring nations like Swaziland, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola. In fact any country where there are pandemics of civil strife. If African governments do not focus on the creation of decent jobs or working environments, we all suffer.'

'Also,' he adds, 'if you have so many people who are not covered by any social protection or social security arrangements regarding health, education, housing and transport, you will not see stability, and South Africa is not immune to that kind of situation.'

Although Cosatu's membership stands at almost 2.1 million in a working population of some 12 million, and with only another million or so registered with other unions, it is still short of its five year plan to reach a membership of four million. Running concurrently with this campaign are efforts to improve Cosatu's service to its current members. 'Organising and recruitment campaigns are very important if we want to improve on the numbers we have, but we are cognisant that we should only maintain a number that we can service, so we have to sharpen our instruments.'

One of the sectors that Cosatu is looking to penetrate is the service industry, which Dlamini believes has been largely neglected, despite being one of the fastest growing spheres, given the tourism potential of the country. He also has concerns for the 'declining mining sector' suggesting that municipalities and mining giants need to direct their energy at re-skilling those workers that will be retrenched in the future, so that they can find employment in other sectors of the economy.

The public service industry is also generating interest from Cosatu. 'This industry employs 1.3 million of which 800 000 are Cosatu members,' says Dlamini. 'We also need to focus on the plight of the more than a million farm workers who are suffering; only 80 000 of them are represented by a union. There is still a lot of fear about joining a union; or joining the wrong one, so the scope is wide for Cosatu to continue to grow.'



Cosatu has in the meantime, published a contribution document on the economic path that it believes South Africa needs to take: 'We are very proud of this and think that we are bringing in many elements that will really help to change the course of the economy. Whilst this document does not bring us closer to our goal of socialism, it goes a long way in responding to the current abnormalities of the spread of South Africa's wealth.'

'I think this is an important struggle, one that any progressive organisation cannot disregard,' says Dlamini. 'We are very concerned about how to empower the worker who has been toiling without skills, without knowledge of the labour market and how to help him in a society that is still class-divided.'

Cosatu intend to achieve this objective by mobilising society through talk. 'We will be talking to business, the private sector, the man in the street, in trains and in buses, distributing as much information about Cosatu's rethink of the economy. We want to reach the broader stakeholders of the country and the broader body of the alliance. We've got to speak to captains of the different industries and be sharper in responding to the key questions that South Africa is asking as well as understanding the attitude of the foreign investor. This is a mammoth task for Cosatu but it is the strongest engine if we are to turn South Africa around.'

Sdumo Dlamini was appointed president of Cosatu in '09 after a year of serving as acting president following the expulsion of Willie Madisha. His term of office ends in September '12. He has, for the past 23 years, been employed by the Department of Health at the Memorial Hospital in Umlazi, Durban, as a chief professional nurse.

He has been a union representative for most of his working life, holding various positions such as that of the secretary of Nehawu's KwaZulu Natal branch, where he worked his way up through the organization's regional and provincial ranks. He also served as Nehawu's KZN's chairperson for three years concurrently with his position as chairperson for Cosatu's KZN region.

Dlamini divorced in '08 which was largely, he says, a result of the family sacrifices he has had to make for his role in Cosatu, 'but I am not blaming that. As a leader there will always be sacrifices and it's a huge task to balance the roles I play as a church person, a family man and sometimes a community person. I also play roles within the ANC and the South African Communist Party.'

He is very humbled that he did not apply for the position of president of Cosatu, and by the fact that he was identified by members and other leaders who believed he could handle the responsibility.

His goal is to lead Cosatu to new economic strength and ensure the stability of the organisation, in which he seems to have had some success considering the turbulence it was experiencing prior to his leadership.

What motivates him daily is doing what is necessary to help the cause. 'I'm happy to be a solution finder-provider. The task of a leader is to help workers out of their daily sufferings and I am highly motivated by that. I don't really think about the position I occupy, more about what I am supposed to do for the workers. It worries me that in some instances there are some leaders coming through that are more worried about what prestige the position brings, rather than the outcome they should be working towards, that of taking the working class forward.'

Sdumo Dlamini, center, addresses members during protest in Johannesburg in August. Photo credit AP