

'We must build a real worker movement'

FOSATU had achieved a great deal over the past three years, Bro. Foster said.

Membership had grown, worker militancy had increased and large industrial unions had been established.

But an even greater achievement was FOSATU's willingness to be self-critical and to re-evaluate its policies to meet the challenges of the future.

The major task facing FOSATU, he argued, was to create a working class movement in South Africa with a clear political direction. This movement still remained to be built.

Until now, worker organisation had been small and weakly organised both nationally and in the factories.

Although there had been widespread militancy and strikes in recent years, a really large and stable worker organisation did not yet exist.

Also, most workers did not clearly identify themselves in their daily lives and in their political actions as part of the working class.

"Strikes and protests do not in themselves mean that a working class movement exists. These are more than that — they are large-scale organisations with a social and political identity," Joe said.

"Workers must build a powerful and effective movement to advance their interests — but they must also ensure that this movement is able to take a clear political direction."

ONE of the highlights of FOSATU's second national congress was a keynote speech by general secretary Joe Foster in which he dealt with the workers' struggle in South Africa. Here is a summary.

REPRESSIVE RULE

At the same time, he said, the vast majority of South Africa's population had been subject to repressive minority rule.

Under these circumstances, it was natural that the progressive trade union movement became part of the popular struggle against oppression.

But while this battle was being fought between apartheid and its opponents, the capitalist economy was becoming stronger and more prosperous every day.

As a result, a new and different situation had arisen and a large and potentially powerful working class had been concentrated in huge factories and townships.

The power of the large employers had rapidly grown as they became concentrated in monopolies. This, in turn, increased the need for workers to develop more effective organisation.

These developments, Joe said, have created favourable conditions for a working class movement to develop in South Africa — but this did not mean it would happen automatically.

LITTLE EXPERIENCE

So far, union struggles have been

mostly against isolated companies and there has been little experience of wider struggles in a whole industry or throughout the country.

Workers and their leaderships have therefore not experienced the strength of large-scale worker organisation and lack the confidence this would have created, he said.

As a result, they see their role as part of a wider struggle but are unclear about the political tasks of the worker struggle itself.

However, Joe said, the popular political movements could not deal with the fundamental problems of workers.

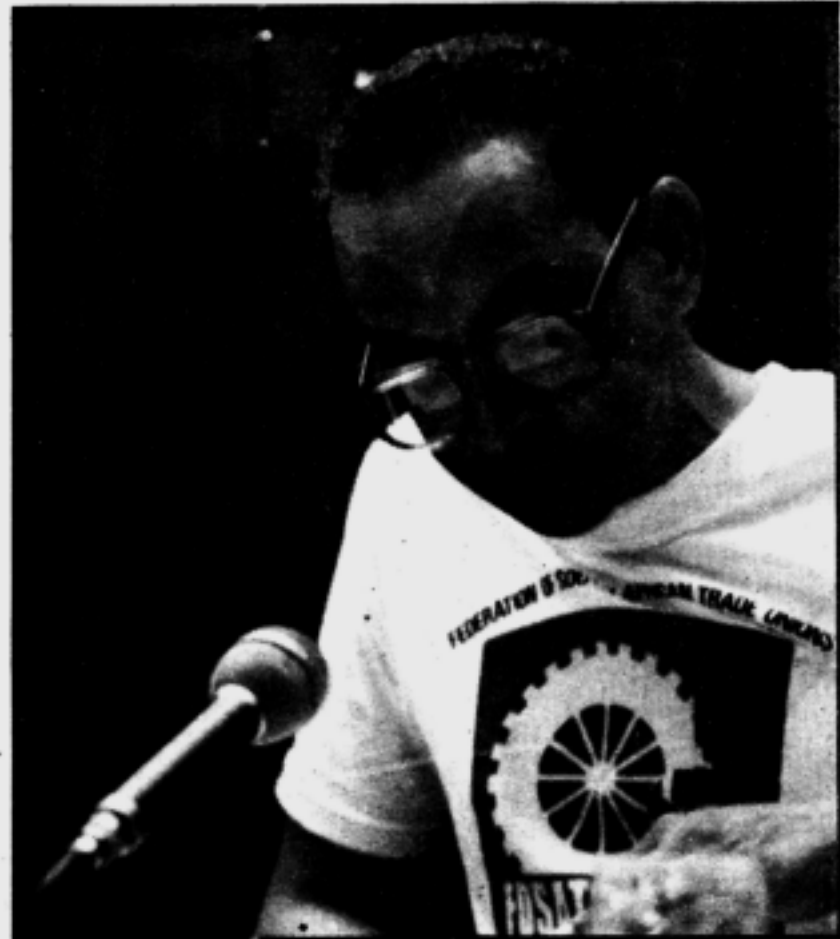
WORKER INTERESTS

"It is therefore essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even while they are part of the wider popular struggle."

Only in this way could workers be certain that their interests will be served.

"We believe that FOSATU must set itself the task of giving leadership and direction to the building of a working class movement," Joe said.

However, FOSATU by itself would not constitute the working



JOE Foster addressing congress... 'Workers must build their own organisation'

class movement, and it would have to unite with other progressive trade unions to bring it about.

LIBERATION

Also, FOSATU would not be opposing the wider liberation struggle but would be contributing to it.

Asking how a working class movement should be built, Bro. Foster said no real progress could be made without large organisation. FOSATU would have to be able to mobilise major industries and major industrial areas.

But without quality of organisation as well no working class movement would emerge.

FACTORY FLOOR

This could be created by continuing to base organisation on the factory floor, where the workers have the most power and authority, and

worker leadership would gain experience through factory struggles.

This would also enable worker representatives to participate in their organisations from a position of strength and authority. Without the confidence, power and experience created by this organisational base, workers would never be able to give the lead to the working class and they would quickly surrender political leadership to others.

UNITY

Unity in the labour movement was also essential, Joe said. "If we are to create a working class movement then trade union unity has to be dealt with very early on in our struggle."

However, FOSATU should strive towards disciplined unity — because this was the only form of unity which could possibly meet its objective.

Industrial Councils debated

FOSATU intensively debated industry-wide bargaining and the industrial council system at its second national congress.

Among the resolutions before congress was that adopted by the central committee some time ago which has served as FOSATU policy up to now.

This states that the industrial council system in its present form is unacceptable, that affiliate unions should not enter them on terms which are to their disadvantage, and that they should begin to negotiate a system of plant-based industry-wide bargaining within the framework of FOSATU's principles.

One of the two new resolutions before congress came from the Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union, which proposed that FOSATU should not enter industrial councils, reaffirm its commitment to plant-based bargaining and should discuss more appropriate forms of industry-wide bargaining than industrial councils.

NUTW

The National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) proposed that FOSATU should only enter industrial councils or other industry-wide bargaining systems if:

- plant-based bargaining continued to be accepted
- the rights and functions of shop stewards were not restricted in any way
- union recognition in plants is based only on representivity and is not granted to minority unions where majority unions existed in the plant.

An intensive debate followed which

revealed the different experiences which FOSATU unions have had with industrial councils.

Contributions from many worker representatives showed how strongly they felt on the issue.

Because time was running short and no agreement was in sight, SFAWU withdrew its resolution and the NUTW amended its resolution to exclude the words "industrial council" so that it dealt only with industry-wide bargaining.

However, time finally ran out and delegates voted that the issue should be referred back to union members for further discussion before the next central committee meeting.

Councils: The workers' views

• A delegate from the NUTW explained how a newly formed employer federation in the textile industry (TYFMA) had tried to force the union to accept industrial councils as a condition to plant bargaining.

The NUTW refused because the proposed council contained many of the undesirable features of other industrial councils.

However, because of union organisation and worker militancy, many of the employers were forced to recognise the union in their plants. The NUTW was now strong and representative enough to negotiate minimum wages and working conditions for the industry as a whole, and to lay down conditions on how this should take place.

It was therefore necessary for FOSATU to lay down guidelines on how industry-wide bargaining

FOSATU's massive growth over the past three years has been highlighted in a report submitted to the second FOSATU congress held in Hammanskraal this month.

The report documents the main activities of FOSATU since it was formed and was submitted to the congress to provide a background to the deliberations.

When FOSATU was formed in April 1979, its affiliates had about 30 000 members.

By November last year, actively organised and signed up membership had increased to 94 617 in 387 factories.

FOSATU has tried to translate worker unity into practice by knitting its affiliates together at national, regional and local levels, the report says.

REGIONAL COUNCILS

Three regions were represented at the inaugural congress, namely Eastern Province, Natal and Transvaal. Regional Councils were formed for these regions in May that year.

In September the same year, the Western Province Regional Council was established, and the new region

should be structured, he said.

• A shop steward from Noodsberg Sugar Mill said workers' experience of industrial councils in the sugar industry had only been bad.

The industrial council had been used by minority unions to create a low wage structure, and industrial council agents had been employed to resolve disputes.

Recently, Nsibandé's union — a union originally sponsored by the sugar employers themselves — negotiated a completely unsatisfactory wage increase for unskilled workers.

• He added: "I cannot see how we can possibly have anything to do with the present industrial council system."

• MAWU delegates also expressed

This is how Fosatu has grown

of Northern Natal was set up in February this year to promote local co-operation and organisation in the area.

At local level, resources have been shared and Fosatu activities co-ordinated through local executive committees and shop stewards' councils, the report says.

Shop stewards' councils have been particularly active in Empanjeni, Pietermaritzburg, Kathlehong, Springs and Uitenhage.

Fosatu unions are also organising

in many other areas where there are still no local offices.

All Fosatu unions have taken major strides forward in representing their members in the factory through shop stewards, the report says.

In April 1980, shop stewards were recognised in 30 factories. Since then, many more agreements have been signed and union rights have been granted or are being negotiated in over 130 factories organised by Fosatu.

Over 1 500 fully functioning shop stewards are protecting worker rights in Fosatu factories.

strong dissatisfaction with the industrial council system.

One delegate said the the metal industrial council was controlled by the established craft unions and other workers got nothing out of it.

It was better to push for plant-level bargaining and continue as in the past, he said.

Another speaker also argued that workers were strongly opposed to the present system.

A third delegate spoke of the need for a wider system in addition to plant bargaining.

• Fred Sauls, general secretary of NAAWU, told congress of the experience of the motor union in the Eastern Cape with their industrial council, which went back to the time the union was in TUCSA.

At that stage, the union joined the council because it wasn't part of a federation like FOSATU which could support them in rejecting it.

The union therefore had to try and reform it from within. Employers refused to bargain at plant level and tried to insist on the use of industrial council agents to handle complaints, which would have undercut shop stewards' rights.

However, workers would not accept this and the union succeeded in changing the structure so that plant-based bargaining was accepted and shop stewards' rights granted.

Workers sat on the council and no decisions were taken without report-backs to the members.

By manipulating the council, motor workers today have the highest wages in the country, he said.