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**SAMWU President, Comrade Petrus Mashishi's Speech  
to 9th National Congress,  
3 November 2009, Bela Bela, Limpopo**

**\*The Context We Are In\***

Comrades this Conference takes place at a crucial time in our history, as a union, and as part of a national and international working class movement. So many things have changed since our last Conference, and so many new challenges have emerged that we must address if we are to survive and move forward.

First though let me say something about the context we are in.

I am sure comrades are now used to hearing about the recession and the global crisis of capitalism and especially its impact on the countries of the South.

Of course for most of us here, we have been living in a kind of recession for decades. Chronic poverty and unemployment are not new in the communities where we live and work. But despite what the newspapers are saying, we are a long way from the current recession being over. The IMF and World Bank have recently warned against raising hopes about the ending of the crisis.

We now know for example that not only is the South African economy recovering far slower than any other African country, but also that South Africa now holds the dubious honour of having the largest gap in the world between its rich and poor inhabitants. These are facts comrades.

We must resist the temptation of being lulled into a false sense of security. When governments for example say that their economies are slowly returning to normal, for millions of people, 'normal' means being impoverished, being homeless, being unemployed and being exploited. That is not the 'normal' that we want to return to!

On a global scale, we know from talking to our international contacts and guests that the world economic crisis will have a major impact on the public sector. When capitalism is in crisis, public spending is the first casualty and we have to be ready to challenge all attempts to resolve the crisis at our expense.

Given the depths of the capitalist crisis, we also have to get out of the boxes that we have built for ourselves. It is not enough to simply demand that we continue to get the bread crumbs off the table. Perhaps it is time to take over the bakery!

If we do not make bold demands now, in the middle of a capitalist crisis, do we wait until the capitalist class have regained their power and everything is 'back to normal' and when the capitalist class has regained its power?

**\*What Should the Response of COSATU be to the Current Context?\***

I am pleased to report that the last COSATU Congress went very smoothly, and though we dealt with many important issues, the Congress was conducted in a spirit of solidarity and unity. The period before the Congress was marked by a determination to make sure that we discussed issues maturely in the tradition of COSATU, before they became divisive, and committed ourselves to making sure that we have a united Federation. I want to thank the CEC and COSATU Officer Bearers for this important achievement including the contribution of our dear late Comrade Violet Seboni.

However there are a number of issues that COSATU must address:

**\*Rural Development/EPWP\***

When we accepted the EPWP we thought that it was going to be used to help give quality training to those involved in it, and that it was going to build a lasting infrastructure for community and economic development, and we thought that it would also to provide decent work.

However, instead EPWP is used for piece meal work, for example for grass cutting and street sweeping and in general filling in the gaps, and does not properly skill workers or give them future job prospects.

Rural development is not possible without building an infrastructure so that services and economic development measures can be implemented. Rural communities need roads, schools, clinics and depots and offices to deliver services.

**\*COSATU Resolution on Electricity\***

We are calling on the COSATU leadership to make sure that they drive the implementation of the resolution on the Restructuring of Electricity Service, and it is important that the process is driven by COSATU and not by individual affiliates. This resolution talks to the need for public control, and for a service that our people can afford.

**\*Police Brutality\***

COSATU must help us to make sure that the policing methods that we were exposed to in our national strike, and that are being used in poor community protests are stopped and investigated. This is not appropriate policing in a democracy.

**\*NEDLAC Processes\***

We are pleased that COSATU and the affiliates continue to intervene in NEDLAC processes on a range of important issues, but it is equally important to make sure that these processes are not confined to just those who attend NEDLAC meetings, but also involve our members.

**\*Union Mergers\***

We must confess that we have not implemented the COSATU resolution on merging with other unions to create a single public sector union.

There has been serious talk about the need for SAMWU to begin merger talks with unions in and outside of our Federation. There is some pressure to re-open talks with NEHAWU for example, and to begin talking earnestly about a possible merger.

Many of us have come to realise that simply merging unions does not guarantee a stronger union movement. If for example merging reduces worker control or membership activism (which is the experience in many other countries), then this might not be the case.

We want COSATU to reconsider the policy on mergers so that it can include unions other than Nehawu and SAMWU and for example to involve SASAWU, SADNU etc.

It is important then to make sure that merger processes also provide an opportunity to deepen worker control, and levels of accountability, and are not just an administrative process of a technical nature.

It might seem unlikely at this stage in our development, but we must at some time soon really take stock of the prospects of merging with unions outside of the COSATU fold. If we are serious about the need for a united working class movement that is non-racial and non-sexist in nature then this should guide our approach.

**\*Building a Working Class Alternative\***

Comrades we have a lot of work to do to build an alternative economic policy and to have it implemented by our Government.

**\*NHI\***

We want to align ourselves with COSATU in seeking to make sure that the NHI becomes a reality.

**\*The Worker's Bank\***

Although we have not discussed the details of the Workers Bank as agreed by the COSATU Congress we also want to express our support.

Lets be clear, for us, the NHI and the Workers Bank are building blocks towards a socialist South Africa and are part of Building a working class Alternative.

**\*Xenophobia\***

Last year, 64 completely innocent people were needlessly murdered because they were deemed to be 'foreigners'. In fact 14 of those who were killed in the xenophobic violence were South African nationals, some of whom were murdered because they could not speak a certain language, or because they were considered 'too dark skinned'.

First however, I want to congratulate COSATU comrades who stood firm against xenophobia, and who responded to the call to help those who had been displaced, attacked and made homeless.

There are many examples that should make us proud.

Given the economic crisis that we are faced with, and the continuing legacies of apartheid, we have to be ready to reject all those who seek to blame our troubles on the presence of migrant workers here in South Africa.

And I would like to issue a warning. Beware of all those who try to blame other working class or poor people for our troubles instead of the capitalist class that has all the wealth and power. Today they will blame Zimbabweans, tomorrow they will blame Sotho speakers, and the day after they will blame Muslims. Let's not be misled by any fake nationalists!

And we must not wait until another xenophobic outbreak claims more innocent lives before we do anything.

There are many issues that I could have raised here, but these are some that we think are priorities for COSATU to act upon.

**\*The Alliance\***

We would now like to move onto the relationship with Alliance Partners, and the challenges of the Post Polokwane period.

Firstly, let me say that we appreciate the 'wind of change' especially with the ANC, and the way this has impacted on our relationship with Government.

We must note the vastly improved relationship between COSATU and other Alliance partners.

We appreciate that the ANC is showing respect for COSATU and the working class for example by sending top leaders to COSATU May Day Rallies, by receiving memorandum and representations, and by intervening when asked to help resolve challenges. There has been an end to name calling and shutting the door in our faces which was part of the past.

The wind of change, and opening the doors is a challenge for COSATU and its

affiliates, and especially the public sector unions. Do we have the capacity to engage and can we make sure that we take our members with us?

Our own Minister is currently opening doors for SAMWU, and we must be fully prepared when we enter those doors at national and provincial level.

We have also noticed that since Polokwane SALGA, our employers organisation, is less adversarial than before.

However we must be careful that we do not over step into bargaining issues. We have structures in place for collective bargaining and they must not be undermined.

There are however a number of issues that threaten to weaken the Alliance and these are :

- \* Corruption.
- \* Politicians with business interests and divided loyalties.
- \* In-fighting at the local level
- \* Nepotism
- \* Tendering and outsourcing
- \* Lack of Service delivery in some areas.
- \* Lack of accountability to the voters
- \* The absence of public participation at all levels.

These issues must be addressed before and after the Local Government Elections in 2011

We would like to advise our alliance partners, and especially the Party and SANCO that they have a special role to play in critiquing the Government and not always being praise singers. They must also be visible in the communities representing the poor when there are service delivery weaknesses.

We acknowledge our weaknesses in assisting SANCO especially during their internal difficulties, and we hope from this congress we can discuss a way forward.

There are many issues of concern in the Alliance but these few are pressing ones.

**\*The Successes of SAMWU\***

- \* SAMWU is respected nationally and internationally for its militancy and its willingness to take up issues on behalf of its members.
- \* For example our recent strike improved the lowest salary by 20%. Though some may disagree with trashing as a tactic, it is bound to happen as long as our members are trashed by the employers.
- \* Since 1987 the Union has not been in debt, we have managed our finances well
- \* Since 1987 we have never had a national meeting that has had to be called off because it did not reach a quorum.
- \* We have never lost membership and have in fact continued to increase our membership.
- \* We have established a bargaining council for the Water Boards.

There are many other successes which we have not noted here but space does not allow.

**\*Final Comments\***

As a union, and as a vital part of our Federation COSATU, we are engaged in a struggle to build a socialist South Africa, and we must not be afraid of admitting so. Capitalism has failed us, and is continuing to fail us. We can decide to go backwards and let it fail us again and again, or we can seize the opportunity and say, now it is our turn to build a new society. A new society free of exploitation, free of environmental catastrophe, and free of oppression.

We want all comrades present at this Congress to participate in the discussions of all of the issues that are listed in the agenda. It is part of our SAMWU tradition to discuss issues robustly, and arrive at agreement, and then when we leave this Congress we are more united than before and are ready to fight for our policies.

Thank you for listening to me.

- \*Viva Samwu Viva\*
- \*Viva Workers Internationalism Viva\*
- \*Viva COSATU Viva\*
- \*Viva a healthy alliance Viva\*
- \*Viva the Struggle for Socialism Viva\*