

STATEMENT OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, THABO MBEKI, AT THE MEETING OF THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF COSATU:

JOHANNESBURG, JUNE 22, 1998.

Chairperson,
Comrades leaders and activists of the democratic trade union movement,
Observer delegates of the democratic movement,
Comrades:

I bring to you all, the comradely greetings of the leadership and membership of the leader of our revolutionary alliance, the African National Congress.

We are greatly honoured that you gave us the opportunity to participate in the proceedings of this, the first ever session of the new and important organ of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the Central Committee of COSATU.

At the time that COSATU was established, over a decade ago, the founding unions decided to call it a "congress" of South African trade unions.

That choice of name was not an accident.

Neither did it come of its own.

It was the result of a struggle to decide the question of the political home of the new trade union centre that COSATU was and is.

The new COSATU decided that it belonged to the "Congress Movement".

On the eve of the banning of the ANC in 1960, when the regime of white minority rule took fright that it might suffer defeat, the Congress Movement consisted of the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party, South African Congress of Trade Unions, the South African Indian Congress, the Coloured Peoples Congress and the Congress of Democrats.

At its birth, and indeed as the reason for its birth, COSATU replaced SACTU as the trade union component part of the Congress Movement.

Accordingly, and to make this point very clear, it became, like SACTU, a Congress of South African trade unions.

As many in this hall will know, all sectors of the Congress Movement were involved in the difficult ideological, political and organisational struggle to ensure the birth, survival and growth of COSATU.

All the formations of the Congress Movement, which had themselves changed with the passage of time, spared no effort to contribute to this result.

This was because they knew that the Congress Movement had, and had to have as one of its essential elements, a genuinely progressive trade union movement of the type that especially the black workers of our country had fought for since the latter part of the last century.

One of the greatest leaders of our movement, Chief Albert John Luthuli, gave expression to this strategic alliance represented by the Congress Movement, when he described the progressive and organised

workers as the spear, and the organised and progressive masses as the shield of the united offensive for national emancipation.

We come here today as a representative of the organised and progressive masses on whom we depend to ensure the victory of the continuing struggle for genuine national liberation.

We are here further to strengthen the links between the struggling people as a whole and yourselves, who, while being part of these masses, also constitute the assault force of the national army of liberation.

But, given the practical politics of our day, the question must arise - when we speak of this strategic alliance, are we speaking of something that continues to exist or are we dreaming dreams that reflect the past!

Does a Congress Movement still exist!

Do we have the right to call one another Comrades, signifying a commitment to our being fellow-combatants for liberation - amafel'andawonye - or are we calling one another Comrade, simply because we are no longer used to calling one another Mr, Mrs or Miss!

It might be that during the decades that the masses of our people and their organisations were confronted with the challenge to defeat the regime of white minority rule, it was easier to sustain and defend the Congress Movement.

Now that the masses of the people, whom we both represent, have scored what was and is truly an historic victory, it may very well be that some among the ranks of our Congress Movement believe that the struggle for national emancipation is over.

Accordingly, if this point of view prevails, the forces we all represent can and must, now, advance their own partisan interests outside of our historic mission and alliance.

If the understanding and agenda of these becomes the order of the day within our ranks, then we must, indeed, say farewell to the Congress Movement.

All that would then remain would be the mere word "Congress", to remind us of what used to be, of what used to exist, of the vital and dynamic force for the transformation of our society and country which could no longer hold together.

The question that faces all of us, that faces you sitting as the Central Committee of COSATU, is whether we should now say - farewell to the Congress Movement!

If you took this decision, you would thereby abandon as outdated the idea that the struggle for the genuine liberation of the masses of our people remains the principal challenge of the progressive and organised working class!

I am pretty confident that you will not take such a decision, which would, in any case, be contrary to your own partisan interests.

Nothing in the history of COSATU persuades me that I should reach any other conclusion.

Nevertheless, I must also pose the question as to whether what we do from day to day represents the true spirit of the Congress Movement.

Or is what we do, in all the formations of this Movement, including the ANC, a mere indication that we are still willing to remain loyal to the form, but are ready to betray what constitutes the content.

These are harsh questions which are probably inappropriate in the context of the mood I sense here today, one of strong comradeship, confidence and certainty about the future.

Nevertheless, I believe that all of us must ask these questions frankly and answer them, equally frankly.

But I also believe that because we are comrades, we must be ready and willing to enter into open debate and discussion with one another.

Therefore, and regardless of the fact of the independence of the organisations of the Congress Movement, we must nevertheless accept the fact that we are capable of influencing, and must necessarily influence one another.

But then, we must not fall victim to the easy temptation to label one another as this or that school of thought, and thus close the dialogue among ourselves.

Indeed, I have noticed that these days some comrades seem to think that the attachment of political labels, like the labeling of different brands of beer, is some honourable revolutionary occupation.

This one is ultra-left. The other is neo-liberal and another is right wing.

Sometimes, when we are supposed to think and analyse, as the new and complex situation we all face demands, we resort to throwing around swear words. And all of us know that to swear at somebody is to look for a fight and not a discussion, even among those who might call one another comrades.

I speak in these terms because you who are gathered here as the Central Committee of COSATU constitute an important part of the progressive leadership of our country and people.

As this leadership, we must never take the position that we know South Africa and the world and therefore that we do not need to study and analyse either South Africa or the world, and therefore provide correct leadership.

On another occasion, I tried to draw the attention of our broad leadership to the criticism that Karl Marx once made of the leadership of the British labour movement that this leadership had developed contempt for theory, for the imperative to evolve an objective understanding of society.

I hope that we never fall victim to this British disease.

If I may speak frankly, in reality some within the movement who think they know, only know what we have been fed by those who are opposed to our movement and to the fundamental transformation of our society.

What is it that we are fed by those who hope, pray and work everyday that we must fail!

Naturally, these tell us that everywhere we are failing and have failed. And by we, I mean yourselves, who are part of the movement which, through the democratic will of the people, has taken political charge of our country.

Those who are the opponents of change seek to convince both ourselves and our people that as a movement we have failed to do anything to begin changing the lives of the people for the better.

If they could, they would like to convince us that no new house has been built anywhere, and no new road and no house supplied with electricity. No new school or clinic exists. No mother or child receives free health care or free food at school.

No poor student at university receives financial support from public funds. Nobody who lost their land through forced removals has received restitution and no black farmer has received support from the public sector.

Our opponents are busy trying to convince both our country and the world that the problem of crime in our country is unique in the world and that this problem is a product of the four years of democratic rule.

They will not tell us that some countries of Europe, even excluding Russia, have a higher incidence of such crimes as car theft, car high-jacking and bank robberies than our own country.

Neither will they tell us that business has never done as well as it is doing today. They will not tell us that the exporters have never had access to markets as much as they have done since we assumed power.

Neither have those who have sought to invest in mining and other areas of the African economy succeeded as they now do.

Nor will they tell us about those who sought to emigrate but have come back or about how liberated our white compatriots feel as they move around the globe, no longer carrying the stigma of apartheid, but correctly proud to boast about our democracy and our President.

The story we are told by those who are opposed to change is that the economy is not growing and that this stagnant economy is shedding jobs.

In a similar vein, the idea is suggested that in four years we could do as much for the entire population as was done for the white minority over many decades, with a budget which, in real terms, is no different in size from the budget of the end years of apartheid rule.

The positive changes we have brought about and will bring about in favour of the working people, as represented by the Labour Relations Act, the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, new Health and Safety legislation and the measures visualised in terms of Employment Equity and Skills Development legislation, are similarly denounced as negatives on the basis that they introduce labour market rigidities and lead directly to job losses.

Nothing is said of the emergence of the so-called "gray economy" as a result of which growth in the economy is not recorded and new jobs are not counted.

When the Revenue Service reports that nearly a third of the companies in the country are not registered, and when it becomes open knowledge that large numbers of people are counted as unemployed because they are classified as temporary or contract workers, none of this captures the public mind.

This is because this information, and other realities of our economy which are there for all to see, would serve to counter the message of those who seek to spread the gospel of failure, from which they seek to gain both politically and financially.

The point I am trying to make is that we must remain vigilant understanding that information itself is not a neutral thing. We must, at all times, seek to achieve an objective understanding of our country and the world of which we are part.

In the end, we must return to the serious business of discussing how we can take forward our common project of the fundamental transformation of our society.

What are some of the things we have to do as the essential elements of that transformation agenda!

We must abolish the apartheid state and replace it with a democratic state organised, empowered and motivated to serve the interests of the masses of the people.

Part of this means that we must root out corruption in the public service. All of us in this hall know this very well that some of those responsible for this corruption are members of the ANC and of unions that describe themselves as members of our Congress Movement.

All of us have an obligation to the masses of our people to answer the question - what are we doing, together, to meet this challenge!

Part of the challenge of the creation of the democratic state means that we must teach all members of the public service to understand that their task is to serve the people of South Africa.

Again, all of us know that there are many within the public service, who are members of the organisations of the Congress Movement, who think their sole task is to earn a salary at the end of the month, do the minimum amount of work and be as uncaring as possible about the needs and interests of the masses of the people to whom our movement is committed.

All of us must answer the question practically about what we are doing to end this terrible offence against the people!

Again, all of us know the problems we are facing at the level of local government, where our comrades we have deployed into government, including the councillors who are here as union delegates, interact daily with the masses of the people.

What are our structures doing to attend to these problems, so that we can, in practice, show the people that we are indeed their true representatives!

There are many in our country who have not accepted the permanence of our democratic order or the fact that your movement is the ruling power in our country.

The theft of weapons from the Police Service and the National Defence Force, the disinformation campaign that has begun and will undoubtedly intensify as the election campaign picks up speed, the activities of the so-called Workers' Mouthpiece and many other things besides, which we cannot talk about today, point to the reality that as the Congress Movement, we have an obligation continuously to act in defence of the democratic revolution.

As members of this Movement, including those of us who sit here today as delegates to the Central Committee of COSATU, we must answer the question, once again practically, as to what we are doing to defend the democratic revolution!

The apartheid system imposed crime on our people and country. The realisation of our goal of a better life for all cannot be achieved while the people are exposed to the terrorism of the criminals and gangsters.

The fact of the matter is that, in our situation, crime has become an instrument of counter-revolution and a propaganda instrument in the hands of the very same forces which created the conditions for crime to thrive, which instrument is directed against the Congress Movement, which is then presented as being

permissive of this crime which threatens the safety and security of the very same masses we claim to represent.

We must, as activists of the movement join hands with the law enforcement agencies to act against the criminals, recognising that this continues to be one of the principal tasks of our revolution, as we recognised it as such during our struggle against apartheid.

At the centre of all our work, we must remain united in our common resolve to end the socio-economic legacy of apartheid which has meant poverty for millions of our people, unemployment and gross disparities in income and wealth between black and white.

In this regard, we must reaffirm that the Job Summit must go ahead and look seriously at what can and must be done practically to both to ensure that the economy grows and develops and generates the jobs which are such a necessary part of the objective which we can never abandon of helping to create a better life for our people.

We also continue to be faced with the challenge to strengthen all the organisations of the Alliance. That is why it remains the task of all us to continue to be engaged in the Autumn Offensive to help strengthen the progressive trade union movement. We need a strong COSATU, a strong SACP and a strong ANC. If any of them is weak, all of us will be weak.

Similarly, we have to defeat all efforts which seek to divide and weaken the Alliance. Such an outcome would never benefit the masses of our people and our common cause to achieve the fundamental transformation of our society.

It is precisely for this reason that our opponents such as the National Party and the Democratic Party are so fond of calling for the dissolution of our Alliance.

They do so because they understand very well that such a dissolution of the Alliance would serve their interests of ensuring that there is no force in our country strong enough to bring about the fundamental changes for which the masses of our people are crying out.

In this regard, we will continue to work for the convening of the Alliance Summit as soon as possible so that we can look at the various important matters on the agenda of the Summit, including economic policy.

We must arrive at the position where, through comradely debate, we have addressed the issues about which there are differences of view among ourselves. Accordingly, we must move beyond the point where a good part of our interaction as Allies consists of crisis management.

We must all work to ensure that the Alliance Summit produces such a result, to ensure that we have the combined strength to discharge our revolutionary duties.

There is no movement in our country except the Alliance as led by the ANC which can bring about the changes to which we are all committed. It is for this reason that we are all faced with the challenge to ensure that, at the next elections, we return the ANC to power with an overwhelming majority in the provinces and nationally.

Any other result would only serve further to slow down the process of change and strengthen those who do not want change but are fighting as hard as they can to preserve as much of the apartheid status quo as possible.

We believe that at the end of the CC a clear call must be made to all South Africans that we must ensure that our movement wins convincingly.

At the same time, we need to go back to our structures to build them, not only for the elections, but in order to provide the means for our people to engage in policy formation and in action for the transformation of our society.

On behalf of the ANC, I wish to thank you for extending an invitation to us to attend this CC. I know that you are dealing with difficult issues related to the economy, jobs and the 1999 elections. But we also know that you will rise to the challenge.

The whole of our country awaits the outcome of the deliberations of this Central Committee. I know you will not fail us. Thank you.

Viva ANC! Viva SACP! Viva COSATU! Phambili ne Alliance! Matimba!