

Most unions hit by recession

# Lost jobs cut into Cosatu's membership

\*Cosatu File

COSATU — until recently the fastest growing trade union federation in the world — could be experiencing an overall decline in membership as a result of massive retrenchments.

Cosatu spokesman Neil Coleman said the overall rate of growth of Cosatu had definitely slowed down due to retrenchments arising out of the recession.

But he said the overall growth trajectory was upward as the federation was making gains in previously unorganised areas. He cited the public sector and the agricultural sector as two areas where Cosatu was making inroads.

But sources in Cosatu affiliates said that, although there were new growth areas, the impact of retrenchments on Cosatu had

DIRK HARTFORD

been "massive" and there was a real fear that the federation was currently in a "negative growth phase".

Cosatu's major affiliates — the NUM, Numsa and the SA Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (Sactwu), which collectively represent more than half of Cosatu's total membership — have all suffered heavily from retrenchments.

Both the NUM and Numsa have also made significant gains in new areas. The NUM has picked up tens of thousands of members in platinum mines in the past year and Numsa has recently gained "thousands" of members in the motor industry — where it recently balloted for strike action. And Sactwu, which has organised about 90% of the hard-hit clothing and textile industry, has made gains in the leather industry.

Nevertheless, an estimated 35 000 workers in the steel and engineering industry will be retrenched this year, the same number as were retrenched last year.

And at least 20 000 workers will have been retrenched in the mining industry by the end of the year.

In the clothing and textile industry, about 20 000 workers are also expected to have been retrenched by the year-end.

In all these sectors, the forecasts are of even more retrenchments.

The situation is not much better in the building, retail, food, pulp and paper and service sectors. Cosatu unions organising in these sectors have all been adversely



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affected by retrenchments.

In addition, many Cosatu affiliates have faced mass dismissals due to strike action. And they have not always been successful in winning those jobs back.

Ironically, Cosatu's fastest growing union is the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union which picked up thousands of members during the recent hospital workers' strike. The union has reportedly doubled its membership to 80 000 members since the strike.

However, the bottom line is that no one — not even Cosatu and its affiliates — knows exactly how many members of Cosatu affiliates there are.

Cosatu affiliate membership tends to be inflated close to Cosatu congress time as this could boost the number of votes an affiliate gets. The last biennial congress was held in July 1991. It tends to be deflated in between congresses as this would decrease the affiliation fee each union has to pay to Cosatu.

In addition, dismissals and retrench-

ments confuse the figures because these are not always accepted by Cosatu unions and they will regard these workers as members for as long as the union is still trying to get their jobs back.

Also, the federation is still implementing a huge computer-based system to cope with the enormous demand on its resources from Cosatu's rapid growth between 1985 and 1991.

At Cosatu's launch in December 1985 it had 462 359 paid-up members in 33 affiliates. By 1987 it had 712 213 members and in 1989 it had 959 263 members in 14 affiliates.

At its Congress last year, Cosatu claimed 1,26-million members. The Manpower Department said Cosatu had 1,2-million members in 1991, representing 11% of the economically active population.

In a period when union growth in the western world was declining rapidly, Cosatu's growth stood out. Only Brazil, South Korea, Namibia and the Philippines showed any similar trend.

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