

Unions in heated debate on sex work

A RESOLUTION on South African sex workers was deferred after disagreements emerged at the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) national conference on Thursday last week.

The resolution, sponsored by Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union (Popcru), would support the decriminalisation and regulation of sex workers while also subjecting it to taxation.

But the resolution was condemned by the SA Democratic Teachers' Union (Sadtu) president Thobile Ntola who argued that it would formalise the victimisation of women. Ntola also argued that the conference was being rushed to approve it.

"[The debate] is only providing one side, which is favouring the adoption. It is not favouring on what might be the unintended consequences and what ways to deal with those unintended consequences.

"It cannot be rushed, to rush on this question, we must find ways around the implications," said Ntola.

However, a delegate from the SA Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) voiced his support for the resolution and pleaded that it not be delayed.

"I want to plead with Sadtu that deferment of this thing has really unintended consequences," said the delegate.

Popcru also asked that a resolution be passed at the conference.

"As 2010 approaches there would be a fight because of the influx of workers who will be coming to South Africa," said a delegate from Popcru.

However, SA Communist Party (SACP) general secretary Blade Nzimande – who is also the Minister for Higher Education and Training – cautioned that a resolution as controversial as the one regarding sex workers would require more political preparation.

"The political groundwork must be laid. We must be cautious that we do not move too far ahead of our people as we could open up fault lines," warned Nzimande.

As the debate continued, it was clear that the conference was divided with some delegates arguing that sex work was "enslavement" to capitalism and decriminalising it was a Western idea and would be an affront to "African culture".

Others argued that decriminalising sex work was not an endorsement of it but rather a recognition of its reality.

With no agreement in sight, the conference deferred the matter to the Central Executive Committee of Cosatu. *Sapa*