

Dance of the undead

Not only at Marikana

Despite the Marikana massacre taking place in South Africa, the event exposes the crisis of capitalism and calls for new forms of organising workers under a global solidarity unionism writes **Peter Waterman**.

According to Wikipedia the term undead describes beings in mythology, legend or fiction that are deceased yet behave as if alive. A common example is a corpse re-animated by supernatural forces by the application of the deceased's own life force or that of another being such as a demon. Undead may be ghosts, vampires or zombies.

INTRODUCTION

I can still remember my fury and frustration after hearing of the Sharpeville Massacre, 1960. I had attended communist student conferences with the charismatic Albie Sachs and took part in anti-apartheid protests in the UK along with Kadar Asmal. Both, regrettably, eventually found their homes in the problematic post-apartheid regime in South Africa.

I have for a longtime been committed to three global movements that in Marikana have been exposed as naked under their empty rhetoric, within their uniforms, behind their flags – now co-responsible for their very own Sharpeville.

My involvement with and knowledge about South Africa has, over the decades, been only for certain periods and – except for the post-apartheid years – at a distance. Both before and after the end

of apartheid, it has been with or through movements of international solidarity, mostly those of labour.

Confronted, in August 2012 with the Marikana massacre, I could not but recall this poem of W.H. Auden, about the August of the Soviet invasion that I experienced in Prague, 1968.

*The ogre does what ogres can
Deeds quite impossible for man
But one prize is beyond his reach:
The ogre cannot master speech.
About a subjugated plain
Among its desperate and slain
The ogre stalks with hands on hips
While drivels gushes from his lips.*

TRIPARTITE ALLIANCE & MEC

The South African state is governed by a tripartite alliance of three 20th century or earlier movements with emancipatory claims, projecting each its own utopia:

1. The African National Congress promising a utopia of national citizens ('the people shall govern');
2. Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) promising a labourist utopia (more recently, full employment and 'quality jobs');
3. South African Communist Party (SACP) promising 'to end the system of capitalist exploitation and establish a socialist

republic based on the common ownership of the means of production).

But there is a very real fourth party to the Alliance. This is the minerals, energy (and financial) complex (MEC), the one that has best survived and most benefited from the end of apartheid. Whilst invisible in the Tripartite Alliance, and the Constitution, its vampire role has been dramatically revealed by the Marikana massacre.

Now, when an irresistible force meets an immovable object, something's got to give. In this case the force has been 21st century capitalism, red in tooth and claw and the immovable objects in the Alliance have revealed themselves as extremely changeable.

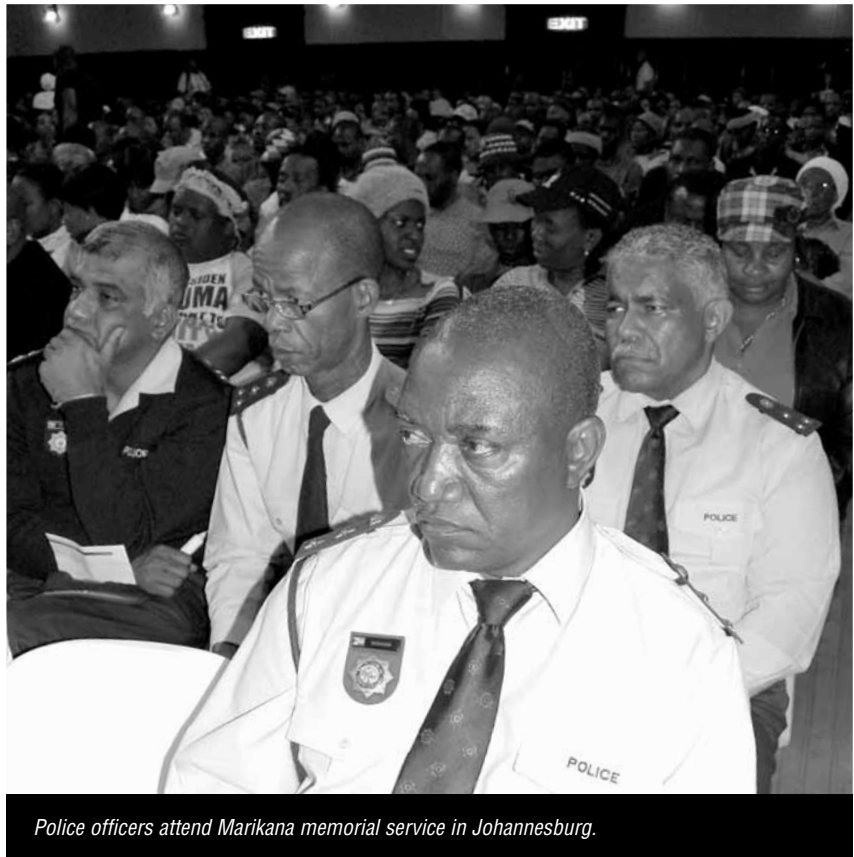
The nature, process and outcome of the transition from apartheid have been well identified by critical writers in South Africa, in such phrases as 'Elite transition' (Patrick Bond) 'Lost in transformation' (Sampie Terreblanche on the MEC), 'Coup by the connected and corrupt' (Mark Heywood on the undermining of the Constitution), 'Gaining influence, losing power' (Sakhela Buhlungu on Cosatu), 'The end of the anti-apartheid democratic labour movement' (Khanya Journal on Cosatu), and 'A vanguard of ANC factionalism' (Dale McKinley on the SACP).

21ST CENTURY CAPITALISM

If national, labour, communist and labourist utopias are running out of any conceivable emancipatory potential, this is because of the ongoing capitalist revolution. It is mostly identified in terms of globalisation and neo-liberalism. To these features we have to add informatisation, financialisation, tertiarisation (rise of the service sector) and precarisation.

Allied with these are:

- The combination of political democracy and social fascism
- The emptying out of even that political democracy, as shown by the speed of state bank bail-outs (too big to fail) at the cost of the poor (too weak to resist)
- Increasing commodification, the relationship between human beings being ever-more that of the cash nexus, signified by the increasing conversion of the citizen into a consumer (following 9/11 the US President urged a traumatised population 'to go shopping')
- The failure to even slow ecological devastation, with radical action systematically thwarted at inter-state conferences, this accompanied with an increasing flow of 'greenwash' (corporate whitewash on climate change)
- Increasing waves of ethnocentrism, racism, xenophobia
- Increasing local, national, international violence, where the understood justification is the 19th century colonial one: 'The difference is that we have got the Gatling gun and they have not'
- Of course, there are those international courts in The Hague, concentrating on the small-scale African or Balkan criminals, whilst unable to touch the big British and American ones.



Police officers attend Marikana memorial service in Johannesburg.

NOT ONLY IN SA

The present crisis of capitalism may be sharper and more dramatic in South Africa than elsewhere. This is obviously due to the equally dramatic replacement of the apartheid state by a liberal-democratic/social-liberal one. There are also the differences between the three parties named. The result is political democracy and social fascism indeed!

However, the crisis striking the Alliance is not unique to South Africa.

In the South, consider the case of Brazil, where the working-class composition of the Workers Party was transformed into one of the rising middle class. The CUT (trade union) and Worker Party President, Lula da Silva, has combined significant redistribution *Bolsa familia* to the poorest of the poor with neo-liberal economic policies. But the income differentials continue to rival those of South Africa. Meanwhile we witness

according to Jeffrey Sluyter-Beltrao the *Rise and decline of Brazil's new unionism*.

In the East - the communist homeland - we witness either, have the seriously illiberal democracy of a Russia in which the former state-controlled unions are restricted by their devotion to tripartism and crippled by privatisation and deindustrialisation, and where power rests with ex-KGB *apparatchiki*, favoured oligarchs and a state-subservient church.

There is also the self-transformation of the Chinese Communist Party and state into a corrupt authoritarian industrialising capitalist regime, presiding over state-subordinated trade unions - whilst labour and popular protest movements rival those of South Africa.

In Western Europe we have seen the collapse of mass communist and social-democratic parties, the crisis of trade unions wedded to social-partnership and the

capitalist welfare state, crippled by privatisation, precarisation, anti-labour legislation, and outsourcing. Whilst most-clearly evident in semi-peripheral Greece and Spain, the poverty and anti-labour legislation in these countries is leaking upstream to the social-reformist heartland.

IS ANOTHER SA AND WORLD POSSIBLE?

The undead do not die. These corpses can be 're-animated' by supernatural forces by the application of the deceased's own life force'. This supernatural is, in SA, actually social – the inertial force of what exists over what is yet to be born.

What is, however, surely demonstrated by the dance of the undead in South Africa is the necessity for another emancipatory movement, with another kind of utopia. Sousa Santos says that when we are confronted with dystopia (negative and anti-utopian ideas of society) we are condemned to being utopian.

This means the re-imagination of emancipation, this time without the illusion that capitalism, statism, industrialism, modernisation, developmentalism, represent or allow for human flourishing. It also means reinvention of ubuntu, 'I am who I am because of other people' versus what Macpherson calls neoliberal's 'political theory of possessive individualism'. The rights granted also to Pachamama (Mother Earth in the Andes), of emancipation as the overcoming of all forms of alienation (the destruction of previous rights and powers, the denial of present capacities and future human possibilities).

Invisible or emergent in South Africa well before Marikana as elsewhere are social protests, movements, networks, writings that propose such elements of human emancipation as:

- democratisation of democracy (recognising this as something

that must spread and deepen or shrivel and die)

- protection and expansion of the commons
- useful (as distinguished from 'decent') work, requiring the surpassing of wage-slavery
- active acceptance (not passive tolerance) of sexual minorities
- an equal dialogue of civilisations instead of a war of Gatling gun wielders against the Others,
- global solidarity movements owned by those addressed (not their jet-setting leaders)
- universal disarmament, beginning with unilateral acts
- consumption serving human needs and ecological flourishing
- the real – rather than token or commoditised – emancipation of women and
- the emancipation of cyberspace.

The undead do not commit suicide. They have not only their own 'life force' but their own – conservative or reactionary – utopias.

Within the Left and labour movements of South Africa and elsewhere this utopia is a backward-looking one, the explicit or implicit reference of which is a 1970s idealised Sweden. This unexamined utopia is universalised and projected onto the world stage. It is here best represented by that Mecca of 'social partnership', the International Labour Organisation (another Tripartite Alliance, in which the self-subordination of unionised labour is signified by the century-old 75% voting power of state and capital).

The dream, however, of a Global Neo-Keynesianism does not take account of why it has run into the ground in its North-West European homeland. Also ignored is whether it could possibly be hoisted to the global level, and the self- and-us destructive nature of capitalism.

EMANCIPATORY MOVEMENT

Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente uses Marcos's story to show that an emancipatory movement is possible.

'Marcos is gay in San Francisco, Black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal, a Jew in Germany, a Gypsy in Poland, a Mohawk in Quebec, a pacifist in Bosnia, a single woman on the Metro at 10pm, a peasant without land, a gang member in the slums, an unemployed worker, an unhappy student and, of course, a Zapatista in the mountains.

Marcos is all the exploited, marginalised, oppressed minorities resisting and saying 'enough'. He is every minority who is now beginning to speak and every majority that must shut up and listen. He is every untolerated group searching for a way to speak. Everything that makes power and the good consciences of those in power uncomfortable — this is Marcos.

Expressed poetically and individually, from the mountains of South-Western Mexico, this is a powerful suggestion and prophetic expression of the new emancipatory movement(s) that have spread worldwide a decade and more later. They have their often momentary, weak or developing expressions in South Africa.

As Naomi Klein commented, it expresses an anti-elitist notion of leadership: 'We are the leader we've been looking for'.

Trade unionists and other labour vanguardists may be disappointed that he didn't mention them, or employed workers, at all! But maybe this will provoke them to reflect on an organisational form and occupational status that today provides no privileged emancipatory role.

Trade unions, for that matter, can today only effectively *defend themselves within and under capitalism* insofar as both the union organisation and class-category re-invent themselves

in the light of what Marcos here suggests. In so articulating themselves primarily with the other exploited and alienated, they may contribute to the construction of an emancipatory movement that has learnt from the limitations and disappointments of the traditional nationalist, communist and trade union movements.

The sense of Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality (how multiple forms of oppression are connected) shows that solidarity expressed by Marcos is also internationalist. It suggests the interdependence of those identified.

Such an understanding is to be contrasted with that of at least the SACP and the ANC, whose complicity with the Soviet invasion of its Communist ally, Czechoslovakia, 1968, was at least implicitly justified by the prioritisation of national liberation *over and against* solidarity with workers and peoples subject to Soviet imperialism.

Cosatu and its predecessor, Fosatu, were born after the invasion. ANC-SACP domination of the anti-apartheid movement in general and the union movement in particular, supported the Polish workers against the Communist-Military Dictatorship of Jaruzelski, and, more recently, has taken dramatic action against Chinese communist arms shipments to the authoritarian regime of Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

Cosatu has also shown itself willing to openly debate its international relations. The possibility therefore still exists of Cosatu breaking out of the iron cage of traditional union elite *internationalism* and contributing to a new kind of global solidarity unionism.

BEYOND MARX

Karl Marx wrote in 1845 that: 'Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism

the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.'

Marx, the 19th century prophet of emancipation and international solidarity, based on industrial capitalism's production of its own gravediggers, the industrial proletariat, got this wrong. As he did about the conditions for this movement being then in existence. In South Africa, followers of Marx (plus Lenin and/or Trotsky) nonetheless continue to prioritise both 'point of production' struggles and formation of a workers' party.

Where, however, this passage speaks to us today is in its declaration that emancipation is not a state of affairs (or an

affair of states?), that it is not an ideal (preached on behalf of the exploited by intellectual or political vanguards). Nor, given its embodiment in states (mostly collapsed due to their oppression of workers and peoples), in ideas (mostly old dogma in the mouths of those substituting for the workers, the people).

It does however, provoke us to ask whether the premises for a global (holistic as well as worldwide and cyberspatial) movement are not now in existence. Then to address ourselves to, identify with and take part in 'the real movement that abolishes the present state of things' and this not only in South Africa. ¹⁶

Peter Waterman has contributed to SALB since the 1970s.

Domination of global capital or wage dispute?

The poor commissioner of police, with no military accuracy on collective bargaining and little understanding of the situation at Marikana, failed to bring the strike under control.

The Marikana wage dispute with the British Platinum Group, Lonmin, exposed the semi-colonial bias of the 2007 Zuma project as stated in Julian Assange's Wikileaks United States Embassy cables.

The silence of the minister of labour and the labour chamber, before and after the Marikana massacre, reveal the laissez-faire approach of the Zuma executive.

The modern political economy of an impoverished peasant economy worsened the rural-urban migrant system that is based on unequal distribution of income.

Foreign direct investors like Lonmin are making mergers and acquisitions with South African black economic empowerment companies or subsidiaries. In the process these companies are cementing a nation state that shows gratitude to global powers through companies like Lonmin.

The massacre of workers at Marikana is therefore a phenomenon of a 'new' fragile global framework.

Rhamases Taharqa Antara, Nelson Mandela Bay