

10 years of democracy what are we celebrating?

Many look back on the years of struggle as part of a way of evaluating how far we have come as a country in the last ten years. **Althea Mac Quene** recalls those years and questions what are we celebrating.

This is the tenth year of democracy. Can it be just two decades ago when workers, academics, teachers, youth, women, residents, tenants, hostel dwellers and religious communities were immersed in the resistance against the apartheid regime?

For many this resistance involved theoretical analysis of the struggle and the strategic and tactical tasks that resulted from it. 'The State of the Nation' was the clichéd name for this discussion that ensured for exciting analysis of the balance of class forces nationally and internationally. There would be disagreements, which at times, would lead to physical fights. The main disagreement at the time was about the 'nature of the South African revolution', ie. should the struggle for socialism be based on the Two-Stage theory of the SA Communist Party (SACP) or should it follow the theory of Permanent Revolution as originally espoused by Leon Trotsky. Activists would usually come back from meetings invigorated by the discussion and commitment of comrades to a socialist

society where 'the people shall govern' and where there will be 'houses, security and comfort'.

At the beginning of the following year, in 1985, at its Kabwe Consultative Conference, the ANC national executive spoke of preparing for a 'people's war' reflecting the resoluteness of the masses at the time to oust apartheid and replace it with their vision of the new society.

It was not just UDF, ANC, SACP and Cosatu activists that were at the forefront and in the trenches of the struggle. Other organisations, which saw themselves more leftwing than the congress-aligned movement, also provided theoretical and strategic direction and developed cadre, some of whom, would later be leaders in the congress movement. The late Dullah Omar, who was a member of the Unity Movement before joining the UDF, is but one of the many examples.

Ten years after 1984, we held our first democratic elections. Often foreign comrades would marvel at the fact that we overthrew apartheid, not realising that it took us a long time - since the 1800's, to end minority rule. And that our struggle did go through intensive periods of organisation building, theoretical scrutiny, infighting, alliances, expulsions, setbacks and victories.

Now ten years after 1994, foreigner comrades once again marvel at how quickly things have changed. Did we not speak about the RDP in 1994, that jobs would be created, that basic needs would be met? Yet this year we saw two people killed (one of them Marcel King) because they were marching with others against electricity cut offs and lack of delivery.

For those of us that use to sit throughout the night in safe houses in 1984 discussing the state of the nation, such news is depressing. For it is clear that we have failed as revolutionaries - that those intense analysis and struggles have resulted in few

palpable gains for the majority. And that the victorious struggle for socialism seems even more distant now.

The UNDP Report on South Africa released earlier this year is an indictment on us. This report states that the majority of South Africans are worse off than they were in 1994. Intense self-reflection is obligatory for those that still believe in the necessity of socialism. Where did we go wrong? Was it our theory or practice or both?

There are those in our country - the bosses - who are celebrating our ten years of democracy in earnest. They are pleased that although things have changed, many things remain unchanged. They are still able to reap huge profits, only now it is legitimate with the collaboration of the ANC state and past revolutionaries-turned-capitalists. Now they are even able to exploit black labour not just in SA, but on the whole African continent. The balance of class forces are in their favour - they have won the moral high-ground. We have to admit that the path of the revolution chosen by the SA working class has failed.

Optimism and faith in the historic role of the working class is the litmus test of a revolutionary. And while one may be depressed about our achievements of our ten years of democracy, the emerging self-organisation of working class communities and their spontaneous struggles should renew our belief in the famous quote that 'the working class has nothing to lose but its chains'.

And what about the role of the vanguard of the South African working class - Cosatu and the SACP? How do they locate themselves within the discourse of 'Ten Years of Democracy'? Can the federation and the Party tell us what we are celebrating?

Mac Quene is a programme co-ordinator for Ditsela in the Western Cape. This article is written in her personal capacity.