

Numsa strike and the United Front

Was the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) general strike a turning point in Left politics and is the United Front going to bring together all progressive voices against neo-liberalism? **Marcel Paret** analyses the dynamics of the strike.

On 19 March 2014, the National Union of Metalworkers South Africa (Numsa) and a wide array of supporting organisations took to the streets as part of a nationwide one-day strike. United under the banner, 'Striking for Youth Jobs, Against False Solutions,' marches across the country drew thousands of people, including as many as 10,000 in Johannesburg.

The stated aim of the strike was to oppose the Employment Tax Incentive Act (ETIA), which will provide benefits to employers who hire young workers. Numsa and its allies argued that this is a 'false solution' to youth unemployment because it will not create new jobs. Instead it will create a two-tier labour market, divided between better paid older workers and highly exploited younger workers, and eventually lead to the replacement of the former with the latter.

This was the union's first major outing following its landmark Special National Congress (SNC) of December 2013, which took a series of controversial decisions. These included withdrawal of support for the African National Congress (ANC) in the 2014 national elections, and a decision

to call on the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) to break away from the Tripartite Alliance.

Numsa also resolved to call for the resignation of President Jacob Zuma, due to 'his administration's pursuit of neo-liberal policies... and the track record of his administration which is steeped in corruption, patronage and nepotism'. Drawing a line in the sand, Numsa clearly identified the ruling party and the South African Communist Party (SACP) as enemies of the organised working class.

The nationwide strike was therefore an important test of Numsa's capacity to be a force for change outside of the Alliance. In particular it was a test of another key initiative to come out of the SNC: the formation of a United Front. The intended task of the United Front is 'to fight for the implementation of the Freedom Charter and to be an organisational weapon against neo-liberal policies such as the National Development Plan (NDP)'. The protest marches during the one-day strike were thus an opportunity for Numsa to showcase support for its new political path, both amongst its

own membership and within the broader community of the South African Left.

The strike was a moderate success. The turnout on the day was far from the half million that the union promised in the preceding days. But it was also far from a flop. The marches clearly illustrated that Numsa is well-prepared to build an independent working-class movement. Not only did Numsa members show up in the thousands, but the protest marches garnered support from a wide array of left forces. It was a small indication of the potential force that the United Front could become, if it continues to grow and find political clarity.

MARCHING WITHOUT COSATU

The one-day strike was also an attempt by Numsa to overcome the current paralysis within Cosatu. Due to internal squabbles – particularly those surrounding the general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi – the labour federation has had difficulty acting upon broader socio-economic demands. The Numsa SNC resolved to pick up the slack through a 'programme of rolling socio-economic strikes that will be taken on the basis of Section 77 notices'.



Marching for jobs: Workers march to Rosebank, Johannesburg during Numsa strike.

Leading up to the strike, Numsa had formed a coalition with nine other Cosatu unions to demand both the reinstatement of Vavi, and the convening of a Special Congress to deal with internal problems within the federation. This pro-Vavi bloc, however, had only limited participation in the Numsa strike for youth jobs. The nine unions did send representatives to the march to give brief expressions of solidarity, but they did not mobilise their members to participate. The Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) released a statement affirming that they were in 'full support' of the strike against the ETIA, but that they were not joining the strike because it was unclear whether they would be legally protected.

In Johannesburg, the only other union with significant participation in the march was the General Industries Workers Union of South Africa (Giwusa), which is not a Cosatu affiliate. Representatives from Giwusa played an active role in the planning of the march, forming a key part of the United Front in Gauteng.

UNITED FRONT IN GAUTENG

The strike had originally been scheduled for 26 February in order to coincide with the budget day when Minister of Finance Pravin Gordhan announced the annual budget. According to Numsa, however, this plan was scuttled due to 'government's deliberate evasiveness and obstruction in agreeing to dates' (potentially a response to Numsa's newly hostile stance towards the ANC). The subsequent postponement of the strike to 19 March, however, proved to be valuable from the perspective of the United Front.

While Numsa had originally called for support from forces beyond organised labour, after the decision to postpone the strike the union began to work with these

forces hand-in-hand. It issued an official letter, inviting ‘the four Numsa Gauteng regions, social movements, sister unions and all organisations of civil society’ to a planning meeting on 19 February, one month before the action. The response was significant, with a wide variety of community organisations, non-governmental organisations, and left groups participating in the meeting alongside comrades from Numsa. A strike coordinating committee, comprising representatives from the various organisations, would go on to meet weekly in the month leading up to the strike.

Prior to this meeting, activists from the Democratic Left Front (DLF) had established a Strike Support Committee to support the Numsa strike. The committee was largely comprised of activists from within the DLF, including community organisations such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee, Makause Community Development Forum, Thembelihle Crisis Committee, Evaton West Crisis Committee and the Vaal Community Assembly, and socialist organisations such as Keep Left and Socialist Group. But at various times, the committee also included independent activists, members of the Workers’ and Socialist Party (Wasp), and activists from within the migrant and refugee community.

These groups comprised the bulk of the non-union representatives in planning meetings at Numsa, and committed substantial time and effort to mobilisation for the strike. Especially noticeable were the efforts of some of the younger community activists, who brought new ideas and energy to the process. These efforts paid off, as the various community, migrant, and left organisations provided a significant boost to the Johannesburg march and rallies on 19 March.

In post-march evaluation meetings, both inside and outside of Numsa, many organisers agreed that the concept of the United Front did not take centre stage. In the pre-march press conference, the political messaging on the day, and the media coverage following the march, was largely presented as a Numsa event with a supporting cast of social movement organisations. Unless one was involved in the many planning meetings and discussions that led up to the event, one would not get the sense that it was an action of a United Front.

As a minor part of his lengthy address to the march, however, Numsa general secretary of Numsa Irvin Jim did speak briefly to the importance of the United Front. He urged Numsa members to unite with poor residents that are waging protests in township communities: ‘We want a United Front for the working class and the poor in the streets. Comrades, it is us who are organised. But in our communities it is service delivery protests. People don’t have water. People don’t have streets, all what they have are potholes. Municipalities are cutting their electricity. As metalworkers, we are going to be part of forces that mobilises and unites those struggles together with our own shop-floor struggles, and whoever is in power must deliver in the interests of the working class.’

FIGHTING FOR ECONOMIC FREEDOM

A big question for the future of the United Front is whether it will embrace political parties such as Wasp and Julius Malema’s Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Though largely absent from the Strike Coordinating and Strike Support committees, EFF was perhaps the most visible supporting organisation on the day of the march. The signature

red berets were on full display, with a small but noticeable presence from the youth (some recruited by the young activists from the Strike Support Committee).

At the SNC, Numsa decided not to support any political party in the 2014 elections, including the EFF. While acknowledging that ‘the political posture of the EFF... is very similar to that of Numsa,’ Jim’s report to the congress raised a number of concerns about the party. These concerns included a failure to specify that nationalisation takes place under workers’ control; a failure to link its anti-capitalism to a struggle for socialism; Malema’s history as a capitalist, and previous association with the undemocratic practices of the ANC Youth League; and the weakness of democracy within the organisation itself.

These critiques, however, did not quell EFF enthusiasm. One young EFF supporter, who identified himself as an ‘unemployed graduate,’ explained how the demand for youth jobs spoke to him: ‘I saw that this thing is talking to me directly as an individual. Unemployment is a major issue and it reached a crisis point, so it’s very important that we now come in masses to support these kinds of marches as the youth, to show them we are tired of this unemployment, we are tired of our graduates not finding jobs.’

Despite Jim’s critique, the young freedom fighter (as EFF supporters refer to themselves) argued that Numsa policies are similar to the EFF because they ‘are direct socialist motivated’. He also believes in the United Front, and linking together workplace and community struggles through an emphasis on socialism: ‘It’s not just a good idea, but it’s a brilliant idea. Steve Biko once said in his last interview, let all those organisations form one, then

the progress, the movement, the liberation will be for one ideology which Steve Biko believed in: socialism. So I believe in the United Front. I believe that this united thing will take us to the next level as South Africa.'

Jim did not speak directly to the possibility of a Numsa-EFF alliance, but he did open his address to the march with an EFF-like critique of racial inequality and white economic domination. He explained, receiving big cheers from the crowd: 'There are no white people who have joined this march. The reason for this is very simple. They own and control and economy.'

CHALLENGES OF WORKING-CLASS UNITY

In the weeks leading up to the march, the Strike Support Committee invited Numsa to share its views on the United Front. Numsa national education coordinator, Dinga Sikwebu, explained that the United Front was not a new organisation, at least for now. Rather, it is an approach to struggle, with the idea that like-minded groups begin to support each other's actions and build joint campaigns. As he had explained earlier to union members and social movements at the Numsa Political School in January 2014: 'We will be drawn together in struggle sometimes with no banner, no structures - we are not launching something now... So no emblem, t-shirt, etc. - at the centre are joint struggles.'

In practice this unity in struggle is a challenging task. This became clear when Brian Musaringa, an activist from the Zimbabwe Youth Wing and regular participant in the Strike Coordinating Committee, addressed the crowd before the march. His harsh words for Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe were met with negative reactions from a group of EFF

supporters at the front. Organisers were caught off guard, unsure how to respond.

Numsa has made it clear that it wants the politics of the United Front to be led by the working class. But who exactly is the working class? Does it include casual workers and the unemployed? The Numsa tradition, dating back to the 1970s, places a strong emphasis on worker control and shop-floor struggles. This approach is grounded in workers' common experience at the point of production. Building unity with community struggles, which are often led by residents without stable employment and based on more fluid forms of organisation, may require a broader view.

Speaking on behalf of the DLF and the Strike Support Committee at the pre-march press conference, activist Trevor Ngwane emphasised the need to overcome artificial divisions and unite against the capitalist system: 'We believe that the working class consists of both employed and unemployed people, young and old... the government is playing divide and rule, trying to divide those who are employed from the unemployed, those who are young and those who are old. We think that the strike will unite all those who suffer under capitalism, those who can benefit the most from socialism. Only the united working class can solve our problems.'

While they may share a common interest in overthrowing capitalism, unionised workers and unemployed youth face very different immediate conditions. Perhaps most important is the fact that they have different points of leverage, even if their basic needs and demands are comparable. For example, whereas unionised workers may place demands on their employers for a housing allowance, unemployed

residents of informal settlements must take their housing demands to the state. A key challenge is thus finding a common enemy, a common set of demands, and a common vision of the future.

Addressing the march on the day of the strike, John Appolis of Giwusa identified the ANC state and its neo-liberal policies as the point of unification. For him, the events at Marikana highlighted the importance of bridging the gaps within the working class: 'The Marikana massacre has shown that this ANC government has no respect for the lives of the working classes, they are just a tool in the interests of monopoly capital... It's very important this march. It's very important this United Front, where the workers who are employed, where the workers who are working in the unions, are uniting with community organisations, with youth organisations. It's very important, because the same neo-liberal policies that are introducing labour brokers, and Employment Tax Incentive, are also responsible for the water cut-offs in our townships. They are also responsible for the electricity cut-offs in our townships. They are also responsible for the evictions of our people when they can't afford to pay the rent. They are the same policies that are devastating our lives in the townships.'

Whether this analysis of neo-liberal capitalism will translate into concrete solidarity on the ground remains to be seen. But if the momentum of the strike for youth jobs continues, we are headed towards an inspiring renewal of the working-class movement in South Africa. ^{LB}

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