

This article is an edited version of a talk given by SACP internal leadership committee member JEREMY CRONIN to a joint COSATU/Labour *Bulletin* seminar in June, attended by unionists



and other activists. It presents current thinking within the party on how to build a mass legal party, combining an emphasis on quality with the need to ensure mass participation and mass initiative.

Building the legal mass party

The dilemma of building a party of quality, which is suited to the needs of capturing state power, but which is not elitist and removed from the masses, was expressed in the debate between two great revolutionaries before the Russian revolution, Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg.

Lenin and Luxemburg

Lenin, the leader of that revolution, argued (in his influential 1902 pamphlet *What Is To Be Done*) for the building of a highly efficient, disciplined core of revol-

utionaries, which would be the party. There must be an iron law of discipline within a framework of democratic centralism, where members debate as far as they can within the limits of legality, but finally obey, with almost military discipline, the central line that has been decided once the debate is over. Organisation, Lenin argued, was finally the key weapon in the hands of the proletariat in its class struggle against the bourgeoisie.

Rosa Luxemburg was a highly respected revolutionary leader in the Polish and German parties, who was murdered by German police in 1919. She was very criti-

cal of Lenin's proposal, because she felt it would stifle the initiative of the masses. A small core of revolutionaries will become an elite removed from the masses, she argued, and you cannot make a revolution without mass participation and mass struggle.

If we look at the creative developments within the Russian revolution, she argued, we can see that the organised revolutionaries were always behind the masses. The masses, during moments of high mobilisation, sponta-



Lenin and Luxemburg - different revolutionary strategies

neously developed creative new ideas like the soviets in 1905 and 1917, which were a bit like our organs of people's power.

Nobody in either Lenin's Bolshevik wing or the Menshevik wing of the party dreamt up these ideas. Luxemburg therefore argued that a large mass party is the most appropriate vehicle for a socialist revolution, because it best taps the potential of the masses.

In later works, Lenin's ideas came closer in some respects to what Luxemburg was saying. But for purposes of argument let us say that Lenin argues for an emphasis on quality, and Luxemburg emphasises mass participation.

The conditions we face

I will argue that both have validity, but we should not consider them too much in the abstract. It all depends on the *concrete conditions* of the particular country which the party operates in; the *historical moment*, where a correct emphasis in one direction at a particular time may be incorrect at another time; and the particular *strategic tasks* given to an organisation, which will differ from organisation to organisation even if they are part of one alliance.

In my view, firstly, the strategic reality we face in this country is that the national democratic revolution is not a detour, but the most direct route to socialism. It does not guarantee it, but it is



Jeremy Cronin

Graphic: Mzwakhe Nhlabatsi

necessary to achieve mass power, which will allow a development in the direction of socialism.

Secondly, we are fortunate, given this reality, that there exists a very powerful national-democratic and revolutionary organisation, the ANC. If a non-racial democratic process like a constituent assembly occurs within the next few years, the ANC is likely to be the major umbrella electoral machine. It would be incorrect in many ways, in my view, for the party to launch in the next year or two a separate election platform, although it might insist on having its own candidates on an ANC slate.

Thirdly, there exist very strong mass democratic formations, in particular COSATU, with its strong traditions of mass worker democracy and independence, which go back to the years of FOSATU and others. These are very posi-

tive features which those building a party must note and welcome.

Finally, there are other cautionary or strategic factors to bear in mind. The situation is still dicey. We are still very far from being in a democracy, even a bourgeois democracy, and there is always the possibility of a reversal to massively repressive conditions. There is also a major ideological onslaught going on against the cause of socialism in our country and world-wide.

The case for quality

The first point is that the party in the foreseeable or medium term future, unlike the mass communist parties of France or Italy, will not be under immediate pressure to set itself up as amongst other things an electoral machine. The ANC is the major machinery for that, within which other independent allies should certainly play an important role. The flip side of this is that a very specific role has to be mapped out for the party. Part of that role will be its distinct longer-term ideological programme or perspective, and its class rootedness. But workers should not be pulled out of the ANC, and leave the ANC to the middle strata. The task is to build a progressive working class-oriented ANC that is not anti-communist. This will place limitations on building a mass socialist or communist party, which favours the argument of going for quality in party-building

The lesson of Ivanov Soviet films and novels frequently depict a fictional hero - let's call him Ivanov. Ivanov is the archetypal revolutionary underground activist. He has been involved in the party apparatus that has been moulded to effectively challenge the bourgeoisie, seize state power and maintain that power against attempts at counter-revolution. The qualities required of an activist during this phase are courage, discipline and militant heroism, which are nurtured in a party apparatus that is centralised, disciplined and efficient. But once state power is seized, and the tasks of reconstruction come to the fore, Ivanov finds himself ill-suited to play a meaningful role. The new heroes are the agronomists, farm planners, engineers etc. The pace of events is much slower than the exciting days of clashes between competing armies, which brought out the best in Ivanov. He now becomes a menace, a negative force.

This raises the difficult question of how to build a party that is suited to the needs of revolution, but which does not become an obstacle in the phase of socialist construction.

for quality in party-building at present.

A second point is that the democratisation process which has begun under De Klerk is still incomplete. If there is a reversion to massively repressive conditions, our own experience and that of communist parties during the time of Nazi occupation, is that a vanguard party that is highly organised, and very disciplined can switch tracks more easily, and move underground to continue the struggle whatever the conditions. As a precautionary measure in our current situation, this is another consideration for quality.

Finally, a party that does not concentrate on sheer numbers, but on cadre development, will be able to strengthen the ANC, COSATU and other mass

formations by ploughing quality and skills into them. By contrast, if we simply go for recruitment of large numbers, then we run the danger of seriously weakening these organisations.

The case against pure quality

There are a number of dangers that come with building a party of quality only. Firstly, there is the danger of elitism, where the party does not become a real workers' vanguard, but becomes vanguardist, a cabal, a broederbond within other organisations, acting as if it has all the answers. Secondly, how do you develop quality? In the past, the party has operated a system of probation, where during a six month period a new recruit undergoes ideological training, and

carries out certain tasks. This was absolutely necessary in clandestine conditions.

But the problem is who monitors the process, and decides who is fit to join the party? There are always dangers of some bureaucratic elite which would exclude good comrades because of personal dislike, or because they are too argumentative, or too creative in their thinking etc.

Thirdly, an emphasis on quality, where people earn their place in the party through activism, hard work and developing themselves ideologically, may unintentionally exclude many women, especially women workers, who because of triple oppression may find it very difficult to qualify according to some abstract principle of quality.

Quality but mass

We need to get the balance right between a party of quality, and a mass party. Firstly, there is mass support for socialism in our country. The SACP, from five or six years ago perhaps, underestimated the potential support for socialism, particularly among workers and youth. There was important socialist propaganda work done by party and non-party people in COSATU and earlier on in FOSATU and other trade unions.

In about 1985-6 the party, as a collective entity, woke up a bit and realised it had submerged itself perhaps unduly within the ANC. The



SACP launch rally: there is mass support for the party - but should there be mass membership?

Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin

party's profile and the profile of the socialist voice was a bit muted within the alliance until a few years ago. Some comrades would say it is still so today. The best way of responding to the reality of mass support for socialism may be to try and embrace the maximum number of people who support socialism.

But we are also in for a complex period ahead, and we've got to work hard to build, in my view, a strong progressive revolutionary ANC rooted in the working class. It's not guaranteed, and we must not abandon that. But at the same time socialists in our country must not become a small isolated oppositionist force.

That would be a grave danger, that would not do justice to the objective situation, and to the expectations of the youth and working people. It is also exactly where De Klerk would like to put the socialist forces in our country. So there are two tasks: to build a big progressive ANC, and to build a strong mass socialist force.

Building the party

Much of what I've already said gives an idea of discussions and thoughts within the party. These are thoughts in progress within the party, and not dogma from above.

I will now turn to the specific thoughts within the party on how to build a fairly mass party (of the order of tens of thousands of members) which places an emphasis on quality, within the next year or two. The idea is to have industrial workers at the core of the party, because of their num-

bers and strategic location. But the party also wants to include militant youth, radical intellectuals and all people who are socialists in their outlook and therefore have working class interests at heart.

Firstly, there will be no initial probationary hurdle, such as knowing classical texts like *What Is To Be Done* or the *Communist Manifesto*, before anyone is accepted in the party. The

party would be unable to cope with the thousands of applicants on this basis, and it would increase the dangers of intellectualism. While we would certainly want workers to be able to read Lenin, it is a process to be developed in our branches. It is enough to have a general grasp of the party programme, constitution and code of conduct to be accepted.

If someone says that they broadly accept the party programme and constitution, it should be good enough. We do not need some secret Jesuitical committee to see if they really do, deep down in their hearts. There will be some exceptions, where there are serious security questions. But that should be based on local information, township by township, union



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by union, workplace by workplace by and large, although there might be information emanating from the national office.

Secondly, the prime emphasis should be on activism in the wider sense. We would expect, for instance, union activists to display their communist activism within their unions, and not necessarily in some separate activity outside of them. They will be answerable to

that organisation and its democratic processes, but also to their party branch, which will ask them what is going on, or why is there a problem etc.

So the activism will not necessarily be narrowly party, but will be party in the broader sense of the word. You should conduct yourself as a communist in a disciplined and active way in your civic, youth, ANC or union branch.

Thirdly, quality will need to be built through an emphasis on cadre development within basic party units like the branches. This must be seen as a high priority. We all recognise that our mass democratic organisations have failed by and large to develop adequate ideological life and political education.

Fourthly, the party needs to place enormous stress on respect for the independence of fraternal organisations, and their internal democracy, as well as a more thorough-going internal democracy within the party. The ANC, COSATU and other organisations are great assets in our struggle, and anyone who wants to see socialism in our not-too-distant future, should not want to weaken those organisations by behaving like a cabal or broederbond. There must be party discipline in that respect.

As far as the party itself is concerned, in the past full democracy was not possible, and was often a luxury when faced with sheer survival. But now there needs to be a

complete change in the constitution.

At every level there needs to be elections for branch, regional and national leadership; there needs to be an opportunity to recall people who are failing in their duties; and there also needs to be free discussion and debate, and a move away from vertical command structures to horizontal discussion and debate. An important consideration is the flow of information to the grassroots, so that informed decisions are made.

Finally, there is a need to be publicly accountable within the wider constituency to which the party is appealing. Such people are not necessarily located within mass structures, but we must try and represent their viewpoint. So if there is a major strategic re-think, you need to go to them and hear what they have to say. In addition, if a party member is widely unpopular or behaving in an authoritarian way in another organisation, that information needs to come in. So the party needs to be publicly accountable in a wide range of ways.

How to begin?

These are all ideal objectives, and many will be difficult to put into practice. The main problem is how to begin to build a legal mass party. At the moment the party and its internal apparatus is very small. There are a number of forces to hand that need to be welded together.

There are long-standing underground members surfacing, who are not used to open mass organisations. But they bring real skills, discipline and extraordinary experience.

Another layer of party cadre-ship comes out of COSATU and other mass formations. Some have been members for years, others for some months, and still others are about to join. Then there are the comrades from exile, with their own traditions and difficulties. That is a rich, complex mix and things are not all going to be smooth-going.

We have to begin somewhere, which means that we will initially follow the route of the ANC, and appoint regional committees of the party in major industrial areas. This is fraught with its own dangers and difficulties, because any structure that is appointed obviously doesn't emerge from a fully democratic process but we have to begin somehow. No doubt some mistakes will be made, and one way of overcoming these will be to consult as much as possible with fraternal organisations on the ground.

We are going into a complex, challenging time for the SACP. But there are enormous assets in our country. Above all we need to have the greatest faith in the millions of earnest, serious and incredibly brave working people. The future of our party, like the future of our country, is in their hands.

What follow are some of the many questions and contributions made by participants at the seminar.

Q *There are some people who cannot agree with the Colonialism-of-a-Special-Type (CST) thesis of the party. They do not want to associate with the small socialist groupings, but would like to be party members. What is the party's solution to this?*

A Firstly, it is important not to be shy of debate and discussion with other socialists who might differ theoretically, programmatically and organisationally. Such a discussion must be conducted in a non-dogmatic and non-sectarian manner.

We need to learn from each other, because nobody has the total Truth in their heads. There are non-communist socialist traditions which could teach communists and vice-versa.

Secondly, there are a number of options open to the kind of person you are referring to, who disagrees with some aspect of the party programme, or is suspicious about Stalinists who they think may still be lurking in the party, but who is genuinely committed to socialism. One option is for them to stay where they are, and be a broad supporter of the party. It is not a question of either being a party member or nothing.

If they are not armchair socialists, they will be working in other organisations like the trade unions. They will form part of the broader constituency of the party which I referred to earlier, to which the party is publicly accountable. They would come to seminars such as these, and contribute their views, which would be welcomed and encouraged for the process of building a working class party.

Another option is for them to join the party. In my view, if they are broadly supportive of the party perspective that there is a national democratic struggle which is in the first stage towards socialism, then problems around CST are largely semantic. They would be debating over words, although I'm not saying there should not be a debate over words, or that the CST term is a holy cow.

But those who have problems with this term should come into the party and say so. The 1989 programme needs in any case to be reassessed. There's going to be a debate around emphases, terms and so on within the party.

However, none of what I've said above means that we accept entryism. If that happens the party runs the risk of producing counter-cabals and broederbonds and factionalism of a serious kind.

No organisation can tolerate blatant hard-nosed entryism, of people who are conspiring not to overthrow

the regime but to steer a progressive organisation in an undemocratic manner.

Q *To what extent is there a debate within the party on the issue of feminism? Is the party looking at the marriage between Marxism and feminism, and are we going to develop a 'feminism-of-a-special-type'? I think that that aspect of our theory is lacking, because we integrate race and class, but the gender contradiction collapses into those categories. That is partly the reason why women's organisations are so weak.*

A It is an unresolved debate within the party. My view is similar to yours. Many Marxists have been incredibly dismissive of feminism, and simply wrote it off as bourgeois.

There is a need to move away from this dismissive and dogmatic attitude of the past. I agree that it is partly the reason why women's organisations are often very weak, and the understanding of the problems of women is weak.

There are very important things that feminism has taught us, which we should incorporate into a broader Marxist perspective. But there is no static view within the party.

It is a debate and discussion which is reflected in some of the party journals. Women and men need to come into the party to fight that particular struggle.



Castro - his July 26 Movement didn't necessarily start out as socialist

Photo: Militant

Q *What are the tasks of the party in the present period, where we are moving towards negotiations amidst an incredibly high level of mass mobilisation, militancy and consciousness. The ruling bloc is retreating from apartheid, but is seeking ways to establish a new social order where it does not lose its power and privilege, and the ANC is centrally placed, with mass support and trying to establish branches etc.*

A It is a major task of the party, not the unique task of the party, to say negotiations yes, but not for their own sake, but insofar as they are likely to produce results, some advance, some progress. But, at the same time, there needs to be a clear programme of mass action and above all, mobilisation of working people.

There is a necessity to keep the red flag flying dur-

ing this period, but at the same time not to make it seem like the major present confrontation is between the red flag and the flag of free enterprise. This is precisely the terrain De Klerk would like to shift us onto. The unresolved key issue is still national liberation versus apartheid, so we must get our balance right in this situation.

Q *How is the party/ANC relationship likely to evolve in the medium term, if there is a transition to socialism?*

A The Cuban example is an interesting one. Fidel Castro and the band of guerillas who launched the Cuban revolution did not necessarily start out as socialists. They were essentially patriots and democrats. At first, the Cuban communists were rather peripheral to the guerilla struggle.

After the successful seizure of political power, led by Castro's July 26 Movement, a new dynamic set in. The defence of the national democratic revolution, the deepening of its patriotic and democratic content led, in a straight line, towards a socialist transition.

This in turn created the conditions for a successful merger of the July 26 Movement and the party. A new broad-based Cuban Communist Party emerged in which the largest contingent consisted of that old national democratic organisation.

In South Africa it is possible that, after an earlier phase of national democratic

transformation, there will be fairly rapid progress towards socialism.

One hopes that, but it is not guaranteed. In such a case one might find the evolution of the ANC into a broad mass socialist party, within which the party merges. This is rather speculative, but it is a possibility which I would favour.

Q *The Communist Party was well known for night schools at one stage. Is there any serious planning for an educational programme? What role is there for progressive academics?*

A There is planning, and the party has tried to conduct educational programmes with its present limited resources and possibilities. Certainly political education is going to have to be a very important feature of party life. As you correctly say, there are traditions that one can turn to.

From about 1925 the party was running night schools, which put a lot of emphasis on literacy and numeracy. Nowadays there are a number of organisations doing that, which means that a more specifically political role could be charted out.

We nevertheless need to resurrect some of those old traditions, and academics can play an important role in helping us re-discover the past and see what we can learn from it, and hopefully they can also help teach in night schools. ☆