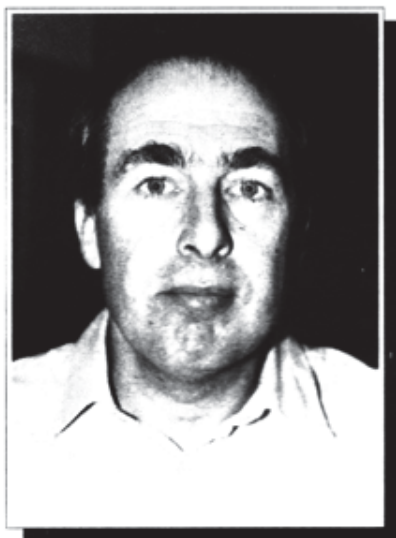


“We are all social democrats these days.”

(Richard Nixon, 1974)

# Calling a spade a spade

A Post-election perspective on the “Socialism via Social Democracy?” debate, arguing that neither socialism nor social democracy are on the immediate agenda and that unions must focus on the preconditions that will allow these options in the future



By *LABOUR BULLETIN* guest editor,  
**MIKE MURPHY**

**A**t a recent COSATU policy conference on a labour market, a contribution by the ISP – stressing the need to accept the dictates of the world free trade market – provoked a prominent worker leader to ask “Are we in favour of socialism or aren’t we?” The response was a somewhat embarrassed silence, only partially filled later on by the assurance from the senior leadership that (in keeping with COSATU congress policy) “Of course our goal is socialism.” This was immediately followed by the qualification: “That is our long term goal”. Of course this raises a further question: how long is “long”?

In the Labour Bulletin special focus “Socialism via Social Democracy?” following this article, Liv Torres responds to the (Labour Bulletin December 1993) contribution by Winton Higgins, which pointed to Scandinavian Social Democracy as a model for SA socialists to consider as they look to the possibilities for socialism in the New South Africa. Torres is less optimistic than Higgins about the applicability of the Scandinavian model to South Africa, and raises the question as to whether social democracy is really a route to socialism or just a route to social democracy. She also asks whether social democracy succeeded in Scandinavia because capital there could “afford it”, an option not open perhaps in a poorer country like South Africa.

In the Scandinavian model as explained by Higgins, social democracy was a step towards a longer term goal of socialism. But as Torres points out, that goal has not been achieved after 60 years and seems to be getting further away if recent developments are measured against classic notions of social democratic progress, for example more equitable wealth distribution, full employment etc. Given *this* length of “long” and it is not surprising that social democracy has long since become a goal in itself for most social democrats in Scandinavia.

Higgins’ further contribution in this

issue discusses the need for industrial policy as a necessary plank in any social democratic platform, and the article by his compatriot Fred Stilwell analyses the Australian experience of wage control policy over the last decade as a major element of a social democratic-style government/labour relationship.

All the contributions have in common the notion that social democracy involves social pacts of one or other kind between government and labour. But does this lead on to socialism?

In South Africa, socialism has, without close definition, been held up as the goal of the predominant streams of the South African labour movement for the last several decades. It has been a dream which has inspired many worker activists and leaders to make great personal sacrifices. And the stubborn resistance of the status quo forces to even conventional liberal democratic political practice over this period (for example, the resistance to all-race elections) caused the pressure for change to grow, and with that pressure the hope that the dream aspired to could be achieved in one great tidal wave as the dyke of apartheid resistance was washed away.

With the concession of liberal democratic practice now made by the South African ruling class, and with the Minister of Justice Jimmy Kruger's 1977 political project ("We have to create a black middle class") now in full swing, the dream of a rapid achievement of socialism has been diluted, even in "pro-socialist" COSATU's terms, to the RDP.

COSATU accepts that the RDP is not a socialist programme. But is the RDP social democratic? In Richard Nixon's terms, certainly: it contains undeniable social upliftment elements. But going beyond this lowest-common-denominator standard, it

has to be conceded that the RDP is an extremely mildly reforming initiative. It is, after all, self-funded. It does not aim at a social redistribution of wealth, for example via greater tax on the wealthy, but relies on more efficient, and better directed, use of present resources which are at the state disposal.

To appreciate the extent of what the RDP is *not*, it is instructive to compare it with recently published research of Andrew Whiteford of the Human Sciences Research Council and Mike McGrath at Natal University (see Weekly Mail, 8 April 1994, "Getting Poorer All the Time"). The analysis of property vs wealth levels over the last 15 years concludes that the poverty of the families below the poverty line is much worse. As was the case 15 years before, nearly 50% of families in South Africa are below the poverty line, but now half of these poor families get less than half of the poverty line income level.

In terms of 1991 figures it would have taken R8 billion to correct this, and this R8 billion would have been available if the top 10% in society, that is the 10% wealthiest, were to drop their annual incomes by just 8%, from R137 000 per year to R126 000 per year. This is worth repeating: The top 10% giving up a mere 8% of their income could immediately wipe out the worst poverty of 50% of the population.

In terms of human needs, this seems so little to ask. Momentarily, one conjures up an electoral configuration to achieve it: The "Let's Give a Little" Party appealing to the generosity of the top 10% to abolish poverty through an act of conscience. The leader of the party, would appear on television to intone with Churchillian force: "Never in the history of human conduct was so little asked of so few to achieve such vast humane effect."

Pure fantasy. Whiteford and McGrath's research suggests, quite correctly, that the mere idea of such redistribution would bring about an enormous exodus of local wealth and expertise. Just imagine the effect on the Stock Exchange, not to

\* This article does not address the issues of state intervention and public ownership which are standard components of social democracy, but focuses solely on the wealth redistribution component.



Worker demands: Expectations, hopes or dreams?

mention those all-important foreign investors!

So we return to the RDP, which does not aspire to anything as grand, which does not intend to tax the rich any more at all, and we must take note that the RDP has already been described as essentially a wish list (Bobby Godsell, *Labour Bulletin* Vol 18 No 1), "utopian" (Simon Barber, *Sunday Times* 10 April 1994) etc. What this means in practice is that achieving even half of what the RDP proposes is going to require very considerable struggle. The incremental, step by step road to social democracy (a la Scandinavia) via rich-to-poor wealth redistribution is not even on the agenda at this stage. Somewhere the other side of a successful RDP Mark I, Mark II and Mark III, ie many years down the line, the social democratic route may open up as an option, when capitalism can "afford it".

And herein lies the challenge for COSATU leadership: will it re- kindle the struggle for a meaningful wealth

redistribution or lapse into becoming "politicians"? A union leader in a negotiation has to offer something concrete to his/her membership, or face immediate rejection by them. A politician does not have this pressure – many go on purveying the same dream for decades before being called to book. History shows that, at least in the world of liberal democratic practice, "You can't fool all of the people all of the time, but you can sure as hell fool enough of them long enough to allow politicians to escape with the lion's share of the loot!" Evasiveness comes over time to be the hallmark of the politician. The electorate becomes cynical, the political process becomes debased, "politician" as a word comes to mean much the same, in popular usage, as the word "liar".

So does COSATU leadership, with eyes fixed on the long term future, say to its members: "Yes, we are building socialism step by step." Or will it acknowledge that this is so long term a perspective, so empty of concrete meaning, that it is actually



damaging to present it this way? A promise postponed indefinitely is sooner or later recognised as a broken promise. A trade union leadership that plays at "politics" in this way will condemn itself over time to a

disillusioned and dwindling support base.

The alternative for COSATU is to honestly admit something along the following lines:

1. In the short and even medium term, democracy will bring vastly less economic benefit than was hoped for by most people, especially workers.
2. The balance of forces in 1994 in the Alliance, in South Africa in general, in the world overall, turned out to be much less in workers' favour than was believed even a few years ago.
3. If ever there was a vision of state socialism – with a new ANC government in that role solving our problems – we can forget it. It won't happen.
4. The most "socialist" bit of our experience to date was not the illusion of a worker-friendly, powerful central state, but our own involvement in democratising our own immediate lives through our own grassroots organisations in our factories and in our communities.

The future of socialism in fact is the future of this last element: democracy on the ground. Unless this is kept alive and fostered, there is absolutely no prospect whatever of any notion of socialism in the foreseeable future. For union organisations like COSATU, which enter into the real world of negotiations on behalf of its members to secure the best possible deal in unfavourable circumstances, this thought must remain central:

The national bargaining forums, accords, wage policy committees etc, will

yield neither socialism, nor social democracy, nor even a slightly better life for union members if they are entered into to the neglect of the revival, development and sustaining of an active, participatory base.

The conventional liberal democracy is very good at "buying off" the groups that have potential to challenge the prevailing wealth distribution. On the labour side the cheapest buy-off target can be confidently predicted: union leadership. There will be a mixture of appeals to conscience ("workers are privileged: they have jobs – think of the starving millions"), incorporation (a trade union leader up to his/her eyebrows in tripartite meetings cannot be out mobilising members) and other, cruder, buyout initiatives.

There is no simple antidote to this – you cannot refuse to negotiate for fear of being sweet-talked to by the boss! But the indicator of labour's health will be the extent to which union leadership can maintain a high degree of membership involvement. When the call comes, as it most probably will, for a wage freeze "in the interests of the unemployed", it will provide a crucial challenge. Do unions fear their members militancy and seek to demobilise them to win compliance with this call? Or do they actively bring members into the debate about what to do in the current conjuncture, with the balance of forces as it is?

It is possible that the best step in such circumstances for labour to take is a negotiated wage freeze, with perhaps a social wage increase softening the blow. But the process whereby worker agreement to this is achieved is all-important.

In an interview in late 1993 Jürgen Habermas (perhaps Western Europe's preeminent postwar social philosopher in the Marxian tradition), when asked what was left of socialism in a world where the "communist" bloc had collapsed, replied: "Radical democracy".

If we apply this formula to South Africa's "Socialist-orientated" trade unions

in the 1990s after the first democratic election, then an important part of "radical democracy" would be simply to tell union members the truth: Socialism is a long, long way off. But to do this without being blown away by grassroots anger when that grassroots is in practice being told that they cannot have their dream, requires a return to the fundamentals which have been the strength of the South African Labour movement to date: Functioning union structures, the practice of mandate unionism, and the promotion of democratic debate and participation.

Unless union leadership has such vibrant, effective structures beneath them, they will inevitably be pushed into becoming "sellers of the bad news" through the mechanism of making the bad sound good, ie they will become apologists for the status quo. In other words we will – in union terms – have turned full circle in the last 25 years and ended up with another TUCSA.

This same point is made, although more indirectly, by the contributors to the "Socialism-via-Social Democracy?" debate.

What has allowed Social Democracy to advance worker interests over a long period in Scandinavia, for example, was an emphasis on building worker participation in those trade unions.

The same message, put differently, comes from the Australian contributors: You can enter into Labour-Government accords or pacts and there may be gains or losses, which may be more dependent on the state of the national and international economy at any given time than on the detail of the accord.

But what unions cannot afford is to allow top-level hobnobbing with government or capital to distract them from the fundamental task of maintaining membership involvement. Fail on this score, and it's farewell to Socialism, farewell to Social Democracy, and farewell even to meaningful trade unionism. ☆

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