

Debating the Alliance

a concluding response

A recent trend in debates on the future of the Tripartite Alliance is to dismiss as 'an ultra-leftist fantasy' calls for COSATU to quit the Alliance and forge an independent mass workers' party. At various times, the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and COSATU have resorted to such evasive labelling, which does not engage with the arguments. Roger Southall, in his article 'Debating the alliance: a response to Harvey' (*S.A. Labour Bulletin* 25 (4), October 2001) also resorts to such labelling.

Labels

Some have gone further, applying the terms 'counter-revolutionaries' and 'enemies of the working class' to describe such 'ultra-leftists'. Does this language – which conveniently misrepresents and prostitutes the original Marxist meanings – not ring a bell? Is it not how Stalin and Stalinist parties reacted to Marxist opposition in the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and elsewhere? Is it not an example of using Marxist language to fight Marxism? This approach lumps real ultra-leftists with those who are not, and destroys the potential for productive discourse and even tactical collaboration on issues of struggle.

It is more worrying when a professor of political science, who one assumes has

Concluding the debate on the Tripartite Alliance, Ebrahim Harvey argues that only conservatives want to lock the federation into a partnership with a ruling party that has attacked and undermined the workers' movement.

studied Stalinism and is familiar with it in South Africa, joins the Stalinist chorus. In his initial article and his response to my critique, he emerges as an apologist for the ANC-COSATU alliance.

Nowhere have I claimed to base my article on a 'Marxist class analysis'. Readers and the debates themselves will decide the merits of the debate. Even more importantly, it will be decided by what happens in the Alliance over the next few years.

A conservative approach

A close examination of Southall's arguments shows that he has an inherently conservative approach. This underlies his characterisation of a workers' party as 'ultra-leftist', and my call for such a party, and the fight for socialism, as 'a confused and mechanical display of ultra-leftism'. In.

accordance with the two-stage theory of revolution, does he believe we are still in the stage of the 'national democratic revolution' and not yet in the 'socialist' stage? Even the SACP has recently suggested that the struggle for socialism cannot be postponed to an indefinite future and that it has begun and is ongoing. History has already passed its damning verdict on this moribund Stalinist theory of class betrayal.

A very revealing example of Southall's basically conservative approach is his statement: 'Conservatives are less committed to [the option of COSATU leaving the Alliance and laying the foundation for a workers' party], if only because it might displace the Democratic Alliance as the ANC's major challenger.' So what if it does and why not? The idea of such a party is eventually to supplant the ruling ANC.

The consequences of leaving

Southall appears as fearful as the ANC of COSATU leaving the Alliance. He seems more concerned with the threat this would pose to ANC rule than with COSATU's future without the ANC. The ANC and SACP make it appear that COSATU must be kept in the Alliance so that the federation does not disappear into the political wilderness. COSATU may have come to believe this.

But the working class cannot indefinitely put off making necessary decisions because it fears the consequences. It has to face the difficulties as best it can when conditions and events demand a new and different course of action. Do workers defer decisions imposed on them by the march of events because things will be hard if they do? Southall wants to lock COSATU into the Alliance, in a conservative survivalist mode, because he believes it would be

worse off if it left. COSATU has had a tough and worsening time in the Alliance for several years, often at the receiving end of blows delivered by its partner. ANC pressures have compromised COSATU and the broad working class on many issues, and held it back from a resolute struggle on wages, retrenchments and privatisation, the recent labour law amendments and its domination by the ANC.

Because it believes it will be thrown into the wilderness if it leaves the Alliance, COSATU has tended in recent years to settle for less than it deserves. The repeated attacks that threaten to roll back union gains have bred a culture of defensive resistance that often leaves the federation with its back to the wall. Compromises and concessions have continued to erode the political power it once wielded.

Nobody in the Alliance has explained why COSATU should remain in and build the Alliance while it is repeatedly attacked and undermined by the ANC. A perverse sense of loyalty, or paralysing fear of the consequences of leaving the Alliance, dominates COSATU's thinking.

The ANC

In challenging my critique of his definition of a dominant party and conceding the prescriptive power of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Southall says, 'Yet that is precisely why we need to understand the dynamics of electoralism and the party system.'

Why does the ANC win repeated elections? It is precisely to unravel the powerful imperialist relations that underlie our constitutional democracy that we need to go far beyond electoralism and the party system. We need to closely look at the role of the IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO) within our democracy.



The struggle for socialism cannot be postponed to an indefinite future

Southall adds that 'we have to interpret reality as we see it, not as we would like it to be'. Whose reality? Reality is never seen in the same way by all, especially not in politics. It is only in certain respects that the ANC enjoys overwhelming dominance. Southall must explain why, while winning elections, it has lost about half a million members.

A dual dynamic is unfolding: massive electoral victories, while the ANC as a party is in stark decline on many fronts. This decline, due to growing disillusionment in its ranks, opens up possibilities for a mass alternative to the ANC. Southall only sees realities that suit his political tastes.

The masses will continue to vote for the ANC until another magnetic pole draws their attention. The mass workers' party is such an option, and we must consciously strive to build it. Last year's local government elections should have opened Southall's eyes to small but significant stirrings of discontent among

traditional supporters of the ANC. The ANC suffered several setbacks in areas they expected to win comfortably.

A labour aristocracy

How can Southall conclude that my rejection of the idea of a black labour aristocracy is based on the assumption that the working class is fundamentally united? There is no connection between contesting the notion of a black labour aristocracy and the unity of the working class. It is a given that the South African working class has suffered – and still suffers – numerous divisions which go beyond the black-white divide. Besides, how familiar is Southall with the lives of the employed black working class in the townships and squatter camps? There he will find no labour aristocracy.

Decreasing space

Southall and others who resist the idea of a mass workers' party refuse to recognise

the fact that space in the Alliance to contest its political direction and programme in an open way has been severely curtailed over the past few years. The ANC's centralisation of power in the state apparatus has been accompanied by a bureaucratic centralisation of power in both the ANC and the Alliance. The dismissal of Trevor Ngwane – a former ANC councillor – from the ANC for strongly criticising privatisation, and the dismissal of Dale McKinley from the SACP for openly criticising ANC policies, are the clearest examples.

If in exile the ANC could unconstitutionally suspend and later dismiss several leading members – who later constituted the Marxist Workers Tendency of the ANC – without a fair hearing, will it not act more ruthlessly against internal opponents now that it has power? The ANC in government will try to crush any individual or organisation – inside or outside the Alliance – that threatens its power. Already 'democratic centralism' has become a tool for suppressing and expelling dissenters. Likewise, Southall and others fail to realise that we have long passed the point where there was a genuine 'battle for the soul of the ANC'.

World experience has clearly shown the immense difficulties – if not futility – of transforming bourgeois reformist or social democratic ruling parties for revolutionary ends. This was clearly demonstrated by the experiences of the Militant Tendency in the British Labour Party, and it was this question that finally split the tendency in the 1990s. In this era of globalisation – which has accumulated and can unleash unprecedented powers of state repression – the prospects of transforming ruling parties for revolutionary ends are much reduced. The repression of anti-globalisation protesters is an indication of

worse to come. These broader questions have not been raised in the debates about the viability of building a left opposition in the ruling alliance, but are very important. The South African state has effectively become an established – although junior – partner in imperialist globalisation.

The state of the poor

When he questions whether the material conditions of the poor are worse now than before 1994, Southall betrays his lack of knowledge of conditions in townships and informal settlements. He fails to recognise that government economic policies have undermined the benefits of improved government spending priorities. In value terms, twice as much has been taken away from the poor as they have received in the budget.

He should listen to what almost every union and civic organisation has to say about growing unemployment and poverty. Again, he acts as an apologist for the ruling party and its alliance.

Southall says that a COSATU survey at the last election indicated 'high levels of satisfaction with the delivery of water, housing, education and other services'. But by 1999, COSATU had frequently stated that government's economic policies led to increased unemployment and poverty, and adversely affected service delivery and the fulfilment of the ANC's 1994 election promises. That is why, in the 1999 general election, the ANC promised accelerated provision of basic services. Besides, the government's privatisation policies really kicked in after the 1999 elections. The effects have been huge dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of basic services, unaffordable tariff increases, job losses and the threat of water and electricity cut-offs under police guard.

Southall tries to portray me as an ultra-leftist who, on socialist principle, rejects a



Trevor Ngwane (standing) was dismissed from the ANC for criticising privatisation

creative approach to the varied forms of privatisation. In fact, the struggle against privatisation in the unions is difficult and requires creativity, which has no truck with dogmatism, but is socialist in perspective. It will have serious consequences for the entire working class, and society, if the unions are defeated on this issue and, in particular, fail to reverse the privatisation of basic services.

Southall claims corporatism can help stabilise our fragile democracy. But why should the working class stabilise a democracy that has brought greater unemployment and poverty? If this democracy cannot satisfy the basic needs of the great majority of our people, they must transform it, or get rid of it and build a system that can

The black capitalist class

Southall argues that understanding the potential of the emergent black capitalist class will be one of the most urgent tasks of

coming decades. He asks if it can become 'an effective patriotic class by investing productively in the country, rather than shipping its money abroad and becoming a comprador bourgeoisie'. The black capitalist class has largely aped its white masters in its treatment of black labour. For all intents and purposes, this class is a comprador bourgeoisie without being an agent of foreign capital. Big as some black entrepreneurs may think they are, they are in real terms eating crumbs from the table of South Africa's white monopoly capital. Perhaps we should call it a comprador bourgeoisie of a special kind. It is because they are powerless against white monopoly capital and globalisation that black capitalists desperately want the government to pass legislation to act as a buffer and help them grow.

An alternative

I do not assume that the majority of the working class would follow COSATU if a



COSATU has settled for less than it deserves.

new workers' party was formed, or that the ANC would lose its electoral majority to it. But we should strive to achieve this aim. If not, the whole purpose of the party as an *alternative* to the ANC would be defeated. Such is the popular disillusionment with the ANC that it could be defeated by such a party – not in the 2004 election, but certainly in the poll that follows.

Southall echoes Eddie Webster's claim that COSATU retains substantial autonomy from the ANC. That is wrong. The fact is that in real terms, COSATU's autonomy has been steadily eroded since Gear was adopted in 1996. COSATU had no say in the adoption of Gear. How can the federation still have substantial autonomy when in the most critical area of economic policy-making – which directly affects its members and the whole working class – it is sidelined? Economic policy is the heart of social transformation. Where is the federation's autonomy in these matters?

Master of its own destiny

Southall distorts my views when he quotes me as saying COSATU can become master of its own destiny by 'going it alone'. My article makes it very clear that it is solely in the context of leaving the Alliance that COSATU will become the master of its own destiny. Since its independence in the Alliance is a charade, it is only by leaving it and *helping to form a workers' party that it can exercise meaningful independence, in its own interests and that of the broader working class.*

Southall argues that the idea of a worker's party that could defeat the ANC in an election, or the revolutionary overthrow of the ANC, is a fantasy. He ignores what has happened in Zimbabwe – though the

mass opposition there has policies and leaders likely to compromise workers' interests – and other historical precedents. Traditional strongholds of the ANC have conveyed to its leadership the serious and sustained criticisms made by COSATU and ordinary people around the country. The Eastern Cape region of the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) fought last year's local government elections against the ANC. These are only the initial stirrings of discontent, and clearly indicate the potential of a socialist workers' party. COSATU's rejection of the ANC's decision to form a coalition government with the NNP 'with the contempt it deserves' is only the latest manifestation of increasingly irreconcilable differences between them. Would Southall still insist that COSATU remain in the Alliance? ★

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