

# Democratic centralism or centralised democracy

## Which way are we going?

In September this year a Conference of the Left will be held. In the run up to this conference *SALB* is asking a number of commentators to reflect on what has disallowed the Left from organising for an alternative and what options exist for a strong Left to emerge in South Africa. **Terry Bell** a seasoned commentator on labour matters gives his views.

If we define the Left in economic terms as being in support of growth driven by demand and, in political terms, as the extension of majority control of social and economic processes, then there is, on an international level, no serious Left alternative anywhere in sight. What we have are variations of the laissez-faire or free market theme at a time of global crisis.

The best explanation for why this is so can be found in the myth of socialism really existing in the Russian dominated former Soviet bloc and its implosion, symbolically marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall. It can also be sourced to subsequent developments in other professedly socialist, even proclaimed 'communist', nation states such as China, North Korea and Cuba.

The switch from radical rhetoric to accommodation with capital as it manifests in Brazil under the Workers' Party government has also contributed to the widespread suspicion of formal political organisation within such groups as the World Social Forum. At the same time, however, among working and impoverished majorities almost everywhere, there is a growing

disquiet about the nature of the emerging and increasing anarchic and brutal world order.

In such a global context, why should South Africa be any different? Could this nation-state, because of its history of racial oppression and resistance to it, be an exception?

### INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION

In a world where the fundamentally reactionary notion of nationalism still holds sway and, in many instances appears to be growing, the attitudes of the majority of the population are usually firmly rooted in the national past. And our recent past, if not unique, has certainly been exceptional.

It was a past in which the labour movement played a central role in mass resistance that created the conditions for a transition from apartheid. It was this internal resistance that forced the hand of international capital to seek compromise and opened the way for the re-emergence of the ANC as a non-racial, and generally hoped-for, Left alternative.

Locally, the independent confidence and attitudes spawned in that period have not dissolved.

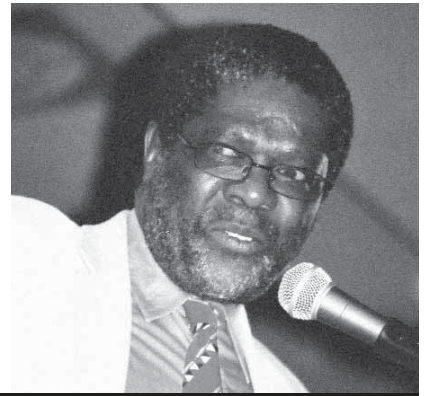
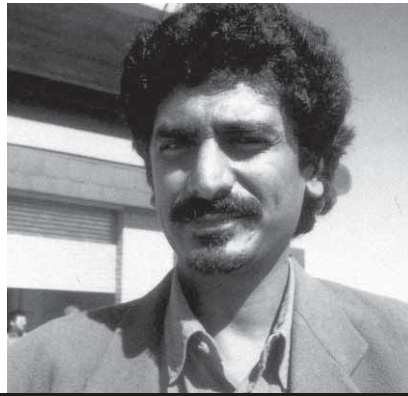
This is true despite the attempts to mythologise much of that past in a manner that downplays the independent role of the internal masses in favour of the exiled ANC. This is borne out in the 2004 Cosatu Worker Survey which showed that the majority of workers continue to see worker, and by extension, Left interests as paramount. The survey also revealed a sharp decline (from 91% in 1994 to 66% in 2004) in the number of organised workers who saw continued participation in the Tripartite Alliance as the best way forward.

To this must be coupled the large number of 'unrest incidents' in working class communities that have been reported by police in recent years. These mostly concern protests about service delivery or, in cases such as Khutsong, what are seen as arbitrary actions by government. Both reveal a fairly high, if only vaguely articulated, level of discontent with government and its policies.

This can also be deduced from the increase in the number of voters who failed in 2004, to register to vote, or who failed to vote, or, in a small number of cases



William Matlala



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in the Western Cape and Gauteng, purposely spoiled their ballot papers.

At the same time, as the Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) survey made clear that the overwhelming majority of workers in unions linked to the federation, still give support to the ANC. The same almost certainly applies to workers in unions affiliated to the other federations as well as to members of various community groups. This, I would argue, is because there is no clear alternative to the left of the ANC.

### CONFUSION AND DEMORALISATION

There is also undoubtedly a great deal of confusion and demoralisation. This is understandable, since the ANC was accepted by most workers and community activists as a Left, not merely non-racial, alternative to the apartheid order. So diminishing hopes continue to be pinned on the ANC, although the vision of an entirely new society tends to remain in place.

After all, many leading proponents of a radical, even revolutionary, transformation of South Africa, fell solidly behind the ANC banner, often as members of an SACP (South African Communist Party) they had earlier castigated as 'Stalinist' and 'counter revolutionary'. One such unionist was Alec Erwin, now often disparagingly referred to in trade union circles as the 'Minister of Privatisation'. He was one of the people who put forward a radical Left vision in a July 1985 paper, 'The Question of Unity in Struggle'.

This spelled out the goal of democracy extended into the economic, social and political spheres. Metal and Allied Workers' Union (later Numsa) leader, Moses Mayekiso who, to the fury of the ANC, once described the Freedom Charter as a 'bourgeois document', moved, apparently seamlessly, into the ANC and the SACP Central Committee before becoming a parliamentarian and then moving into business.

The apparent co-option by the 'fat cats' of capital of prominent trade union figures, ranging from Jay and Jayendra Naidoo to Marcel Golding, Johnny Copelyn and Cyril Ramaphosa, as well as the more political Mbhazima Shilowa has also undoubtedly encouraged a level of cynicism about organised politics and politicians. This must result in some degree of wariness about embarking on yet another, new, Left project. Rather try to fix the one in which hope was initially placed.

### WHAT ALTERNATIVE? HOWEVER, FAILING THAT...?

So far, only a minority of trade unionists who have been surveyed put forward the concept of launching a Left alternative, despite conditions which seem to favour such a move. Various small, often tiny, fragments of the revolutionary Left that still exist, also promote the idea of a Left alternative, while elements in the SACP and the Young Communist League, want their party to step into this position as part of its 'historic role'.

Yet the part played by the SACP is perhaps the major obstacle to the emergence of a Left, albeit

reformist, alternative. Despite having lost its ideological foundation with the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, the SACP has retained, to a fairly large degree, the image of being a socialist, left alternative. Although its membership, even if one accepts the officially claimed 53 000, is small, the party wields massive influence within Cosatu and in its major affiliates. At a bureaucratic level, the SACP exercises control over the federation and affiliates such as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) and the major teachers' union, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu).

A motion tabled by then NUM leader Gwede Mantashe at Cosatu's 1996 congress ensured that the SACP was adopted formally by Cosatu as 'the workers' party'. Mantashe is, of course, now the chair of the SACP and secretary-general of the ANC.

There is considerable irony in this situation, because the SACP, which effectively controlled the exiled SA Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu) opposed the emergence of the new labour movement of the 1970s. In fact, the emergence of Cosatu was also initially opposed, and a massive international labour movement campaign around treason charges facing Moses Mayekiso and the 'Alex Five' drew open hostility.

This was because Sactu and the SACP had decreed that South Africa was a fascist state and that free, democratic trade unionism could not, therefore, exist. In 1985, Sactu's London representative, Archie

Sibeko, spelled this out in maintaining on the eve of the Cosatu launch, that: "Sactu is the only legitimate representative of South African workers." This was a reiteration of the position taken by Sactu general secretary John Gaetsewe in a 1977 paper dealing with the then emerging union movement in South Africa.

But the ANC had, by that stage, managed to project itself, not only in Cuba, Eastern Europe and the Scandinavian countries but more widely as an alternative government. Internationally, it was the only choice – the only game in town. The simplistic formula of either for or against came into play. The bulk of the labour movement and community groups trooped into the ANC, not as independent supporters of a particular project, but to be subsumed, although never totally.

An element of independence remained, and remains. It could be seen at the ANC's tumultuous conference in Polokwane in December where Jacob Zuma emerged as ANC president. The old guard was unceremoniously dumped in a move widely hailed as a shift to the Left, especially with Mantashe in the powerful secretary-general post. Cosatu and SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande played the role of king makers, being among the most prominent backers of Zuma.

But any idea of this constituting a move to the Left is an illusion. As both Zuma and Mantashe have reiterated: ANC policies remain in place. All that is really promised is a change in leadership style. However,

it is probable that the infighting and contestation at Polokwane did, as political analyst Steven Friedman put it, possibly unleash a 'genie' of democracy which no faction may be able to control.

If this assumption by Friedman is correct, and there is good reason to suppose he is, then we should again see organised workers, allied with social movements, putting demands directly to government to alter the 'business friendly' environment that has resulted in the widening wage and welfare gap. For the moment, however, the targets of protests, led by Cosatu and the SACP, have been the beneficiaries of a system created by a government of which Jacob Zuma was an integral part. This is a matter of focusing largely on the symptoms instead of the cause.

For on the basis of existing policies, there is no way that the situation can be changed. Realisation of this over time could see organised labour again discovering its independence and insisting on prioritising its own interests. The upshot could be the move to a Left alternative, but only if this has a mass base, almost certainly in the trade union movement which importantly stresses shopfloor, grassroots democratic control around an agreed policy platform based, perhaps on the liberal core of the Constitution.

Such a development could be the embodiment of democratic centralism in which the powers of decision making, of hiring, firing and delegating remain with the majority. This would stand a good chance of success.

However, there seems just as much likelihood that rising anger and worker demands could be channelled into a bureaucratic structure best characterised as centralised democracy in which a party elite dominates and dictates. This distortion of democratic centralism, which afflicts groups from both the Stalinist and Trotskyist traditions, would result in a deformed and possibly dangerous entity.

There also exists a third 'Left' possibility: the premature launch by disparate groups sharing only general disgruntlement with the status quo. Such an effort would almost certainly be stillborn and further entrench demoralisation and consequent apathy which could prove a fertile breeding ground for the Right.

Xenophobia, an overtly nasty manifestation of nationalism, already exists to a worrying degree throughout the country. Ethnic animosities, which are essentially parochial examples of the poison of nationalism, are also not far from the surface in many areas. It is to these forces that beleaguered capital and autocratic governments will turn to deflect the tide of demands for real change. In the absence of a clear, humane Left alternative, such forces will be encouraged and unleashed as the harbingers of a new repression. LB

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