

Getting to grips with a new workers' party

Although there has been much reference in recent debates to a mass workers' party (MWP) little or no real analysis of the prospects and problems of forming a MWP has taken place. This, I maintain is the most important question facing the labour movement in South Africa today.

The debate on a MWP in this country is not new. There was much talk about it in earlier years, particularly in the 1993-1994 period, once the miserable basis of the negotiated settlement became clear to the left outside the Alliance. Some practical attempts were made to begin a movement to build a MWP, but for many reasons, this initiative did not survive. Some of these left groups, under the name of the Workers' List Party, participated in the 1994 elections but with little success.

The adoption of Gear

The difference with the recent discussions is that the working class has had the benefit of eight years of actual experience with African National Congress (ANC) rule on which to reflect. This experience of greater poverty, unemployment and many other social ills – partly the result of the compromises made by the ANC during negotiations and despite the many important democratic changes and attempts by the ANC to improve the lives of our people since 1994 – has served to reinforce the need for a MWP.

Ebrahim Harvey explores the prospects and problems involved in forming a mass workers' party.

Whereas the earlier moves towards a MWP were based on the compromises written into the text of the negotiated settlement, today they drip with the blood of workers and is so stark as to be unquestionable. Not even the many earlier compromises made is as bad as the economic policy – the growth, employment and redistribution strategy (Gear) – adopted in 1996 without consultation with their ally, Cosatu, and behind their backs.

While there are many examples of betrayal, the dropping of the policy of nationalisation, which was a key demand in the Freedom Charter since 1955 (nothing was said about this when President Thabo Mbeki spoke of the Charter at the recent 90th anniversary of the ANC or on Freedom Charter days) and the adoption instead of the privatisation policy is the clearest example. This cleared the way for the adoption of Gear which has caused many job losses and other hardships like increased tariffs and electricity and water cut-offs.

That the ANC could privatise even basic

services and thereby, make life so much harder for poor people at a time when they already faced growing poverty made the betrayal clear beyond any doubt. Worse still, the ANC ignored the huge international evidence against privatisation.

Factors hindering an MWP

It is against this background that the question of an independent MWP becomes very important. But let us look closely at the prospects and problems of forming a MWP. While the need for a MWP does exist most workers are not consciously ready to join or form it as they may not realise the need for a party of their own. Most may still think that the ANC can work for them but that they need to be patient and understand that all their problems cannot be solved in a few years.

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This is what the ANC has been telling them. Many, particularly those who are not organised into unions and community organisations, may be confused about the developments since 1994 and of the ANC government's performance. They, including the poorest of the poor who have borne the brunt of the ANC government's economic policies, may still be under the powerful influence of the ANC.

Therefore, any move to form a MWP has to take into account the wide gulf separating the realisation of a MWP - for which the material conditions are ripe - and the consciousness of the majority of the working class, which has not yet

realised the need for such a party. The biggest obstacle to closing this divide is going to be the enormous but often shaky power of the strained Alliance.

Workers rethink the Alliance

It is mainly amongst the organised workers that much thinking is going on about their conditions and future in the Tripartite Alliance. So much has happened since 1994 that shows that the ANC government is not as friendly and representative of their interests as they thought they would be. There is growing doubt in their minds as to whether the ANC can continue to lead the Alliance and whether Cosatu can continue to remain in the Alliance while they have been attacked many times since 1994.

Some Cosatu affiliates have already shown that these issues are beginning to stir the minds of the most ordinary of their members. Although they may be moving in that direction they have not yet clearly and firmly come to the conclusion that they need an alternative MWP. This is partly because the Cosatu leadership work against this realisation.

Under pressure from the ANC government Cosatu appears to be determined to nip in the bud moves by its affiliates towards a workers' socialist alternative to the ANC. This is the biggest problem facing those affiliates who feel that the Alliance should end. How this situation works itself out in the next year or two will be critical for a MWP.

But it is through the ongoing battles between working class communities and local government over privatisation, rate increases, poor services, water and electricity cut-offs, housing and so on that the future supporters and leaders of the MWP will likely emerge. This growing movement in many urban areas could become a major base of support for a



Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi during the privatisation strike.

MWP and in itself act as a pole of attraction for Cosatu and other unions.

Role of Cosatu in the Alliance

Cosatu is very important to the ruling ANC, although they often act otherwise. There is no doubt that it is the single biggest constituency that votes for the ANC if family members and relatives of the federation's nearly 2-million members are added together. It is Cosatu's electoral power that underlies the great concern the ANC has about it moving to form a workers' party in opposition to it. At the same time, without Cosatu a MWP would not be as powerful as it needs to be to defeat the ANC.

While Cosatu may not join the movement to build a MWP or is not part of it when it is launched this will not mean that its members will not vote for it.

It is possible that many members could vote for the MWP while Cosatu remains in alliance with the ANC. This is possible for those workers who have voted ANC, not because they were pleased with it, but because they had no alternative.

The Cosatu leadership's zigzag relationship with the ANC government over the years has not helped its own members understand what is going on, and has failed to provide them with strong, clear and consistent leadership. The federation has jumped from one position to another with unbelievable confusion. Occasional militant criticism of the ANC has been followed by timid caution, confusion and even servile retreat when President Thabo Mbeki tightens the screws both behind the scenes and in public.

One day Cosatu is throwing wild

punches at the ANC and the next they are hugging and holding hands. Late last year when the ANC and Democratic Alliance (DA) joined forces the federation's Western Cape leadership welcomed the merger but their national leadership rejected the move 'with the contempt it deserves'. Two weeks later Cosatu's central committee meeting, attended by several senior ANC leaders, took a decision to support the ANC-DA coalition.

What are ordinary members of Cosatu suppose to make out of this confusion on a very important matter? At the recent meeting between Cosatu and the ANC - at which President Thabo Mbeki once again accused the unions of trying to undermine his government - the Cosatu leadership said they wanted to work with the ANC and that the Alliance must be strengthened.

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This comes after the accusations late last year by the ANC that certain - 'ultra-leftist' and 'counter-revolutionary' Cosatu leaders wanted to form a political party in opposition to the ANC and overthrow Mbeki. How do workers make sense of what is going on? But what it does reveal is the ANC's grave concern with a left opposition party.

The cunning psychology of Mbeki in particular appears to be this: accuse Cosatu of undermining the ANC government and wanting to form an opposition party not because there is real evidence of it but in order to ensure that by raising it as a 'counter-revolutionary'

evil, Cosatu will not dare end up openly supporting a workers' party and remain trapped in the Alliance.

Mass-based character critical

The process of building a MWP is critical. The danger always exists that a small group of workers and intellectuals may substitute themselves for the working class and believe they represent them. This does not mean that a small worker-based initiative cannot begin the movement to build a MWP. However, the mass character of the party will require a bottom-up approach that not only defines itself, its purpose and programme but also owns the process.

Process is also more important in a situation like ours where most organised workers appear still under the influence of the ANC. Unless the movement to build a MWP wins over a substantial chunk of this support, particularly in the unions, it is likely to falter.

There are some on the left who have a misguided objection to campaigning for the ideas of a MWP now. They say it is premature and that we need instead to deal with workers' immediate problems of poverty, jobs and housing. This is one-sided nonsense. While it is very clear that workers are far from ready to launch a MWP it does not in the least justify not talking, debating and even campaigning for it. There is no conflict between fighting daily issues and campaigning for a MWP. In fact the ideas and programme of a MWP will help to clarify the purpose, direction and resolve of daily struggles.

The need for a MWP is not an intellectual or academic exercise - though the debate may be conducted in those terms. It is a matter of life and death for millions of poor, hungry, jobless and homeless people who see no party strongly representing their interests.

Furthermore, to suggest that the ideas of a MWP must be reserved because it is not the right time and that we should concentrate on bread and butter issues is not only wrong because it is a one-sided approach but perhaps more importantly, it plays into the hands of those who are dead against it in the first place.

Those who do not support a movement to build a MWP now also fail to realise that we live in a constitutional democracy in which questions of political power are decided through elections and that this reality will most likely remain for a long time to come. It is in recognition of this set of realities that we need to begin now to harness the collective ideas, energy and creativity of the broad left towards the objective of a MWP in order to hopefully have a party significant enough to contest the 2004 elections.

Left-based alternative

Faced with the worsening conditions of the working class, the fact that it is too late for the ANC to change course now and that it would be a decade since 1994 it is important that the 2004 elections for the first time presents a serious alternative to the ANC. Although it may not do very well, it will certainly make a significant impact, gain valuable experience, all of which would lay a good basis for working towards the 2009 elections.



Pic: Pictu'net

It is becoming clear that the future of the labour movement is a left-based alternative that can challenge and defeat the ANC. This is reinforced by the recent moves by the United Democratic Movement to adopt more leftist positions. Whereas this party supported Gear all along they now denounce it and adopted left economic policies at their national congress in December. If its leader Bantu Holomisa can now say that the future of this country was based on a 'strong alternative to the left of the ANC' then there can be no doubt that it is a sign of the times. The ideas of and time for a MWP has certainly arrived.

Ebrahim Harvey is a freelance journalist