

Making the necessary possible

A recent issue of the *Bulletin* (25 (3)) had a special focus on 'Challenges facing labour'. The focus was drawn from a workshop entitled 'Globalisation and democracy: challenges facing labour'. The issue as a whole provides a sober reflection on the future of the South African labour movement, labour studies and the *Bulletin* itself. (And not only because it has so little to say about either globalisation or democracy!)

A double blow

These are hard times for the South African labour movement. From 1974 to 1994, it provided a point of reference not only for the liberation movement but also for the international labour and anti-apartheid movements.

For 20 years, the movement (and the *Bulletin*) developed certain strategies, political goals and an underlying worldview. This worldview – a contradictory and changing combination of nationalism, socialism and liberal democracy – allowed South African workers, unions and left labour specialists to nonetheless see themselves as a collective actor and to play a major role in the liberation movement.

Liberal democratisation nationally and neoliberal globalisation internationally coincided to strike South African workers and unions in the most violent and

Peter Waterman responds to the Bulletin focus on 'Challenges facing labour' and suggests how the South African labour movement might re-invent itself.

unpredicted ways. Their impact has also de-constructed the worldview informing and inspiring labour organisation and struggle.

The effects of the blow

The discouraging and disorienting effects of this double blow are revealed in that issue of the *Bulletin*. Firstly, the widely differing orientations of the labour specialists are at issue. Roger Southall's contribution reveals four approaches: conservative, radical, corporatist and radical-democratic. (Unfortunately, however, he confuses 'theoretical approaches to' and 'strategic options of' labour, thus suggesting disorientation in South African labour studies.) Secondly, it is the piece by Gwede Mantashe, NUM's general secretary, which deals with the *Bulletin* as if it only existed in the past and with the present and future only rhetorically. Thirdly, it lies for me also in the piece by Chris Bolsmann, which deals

with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in terms of a South/North divide. This divide does not explain the contradictory nature of the data he provides. Therefore, it gives little or no guidance to an understanding of an international trade union movement, which is in a related crisis!

Fundamental issues of real importance to South African workers are discussed. But these are framed within 'industrial relations', 'union studies', 'unions and development', or 'unions and politics' terms, that hardly all point in a radical-democratic direction and that obscure a more general and motivating worldview.

It is significant that the most wide-ranging and coherent overview of labour's problems in South Africa is by Lloyd Sachikonye from Zimbabwe! His piece is misleadingly entitled 'The art of the possible', since Sachikonye himself apparently wanted to stress that politics is the art of making the impossible possible.

It is further significant that the union most aware of the developing globalised networked capitalism (GNC) is MWU-Solidarity, a non-COSATU one. It, however, rather than disputing the new capitalism, is subordinating itself to it. There is, however, no guarantee that this wholehearted embrace of a GNC will not attract COSATU members if COSATU continues to dispute a national industrial capitalism that is disappearing.

A new worldview

We need a new general worldview if we are to understand and inspire labour struggles in South Africa (or anywhere else for that matter) in the era of a GNC. This view can be drawn out of critical and socially engaged globalisation theory. Part of it is the contemporary theory and

practice of international social movements. Within this, I would place the problems, theories and strategies displayed in that issue of the *Bulletin*.

I will not go into globalisation theory, except to say that sufficient radical-democratic social theory exists that recognises the reality of a GNC. This theory reveals GNC's dangerous contradictions and increasing instability, and points toward networked radical-democratic social movements for the provision of solutions (for example Waterman, 1999, 'Reinventing social emancipation', 2000). As for the theory and practice of the international and internationalist social movements, we have only to consider the anti-globalisation movement and the literature that is coming out of it (for example Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000).

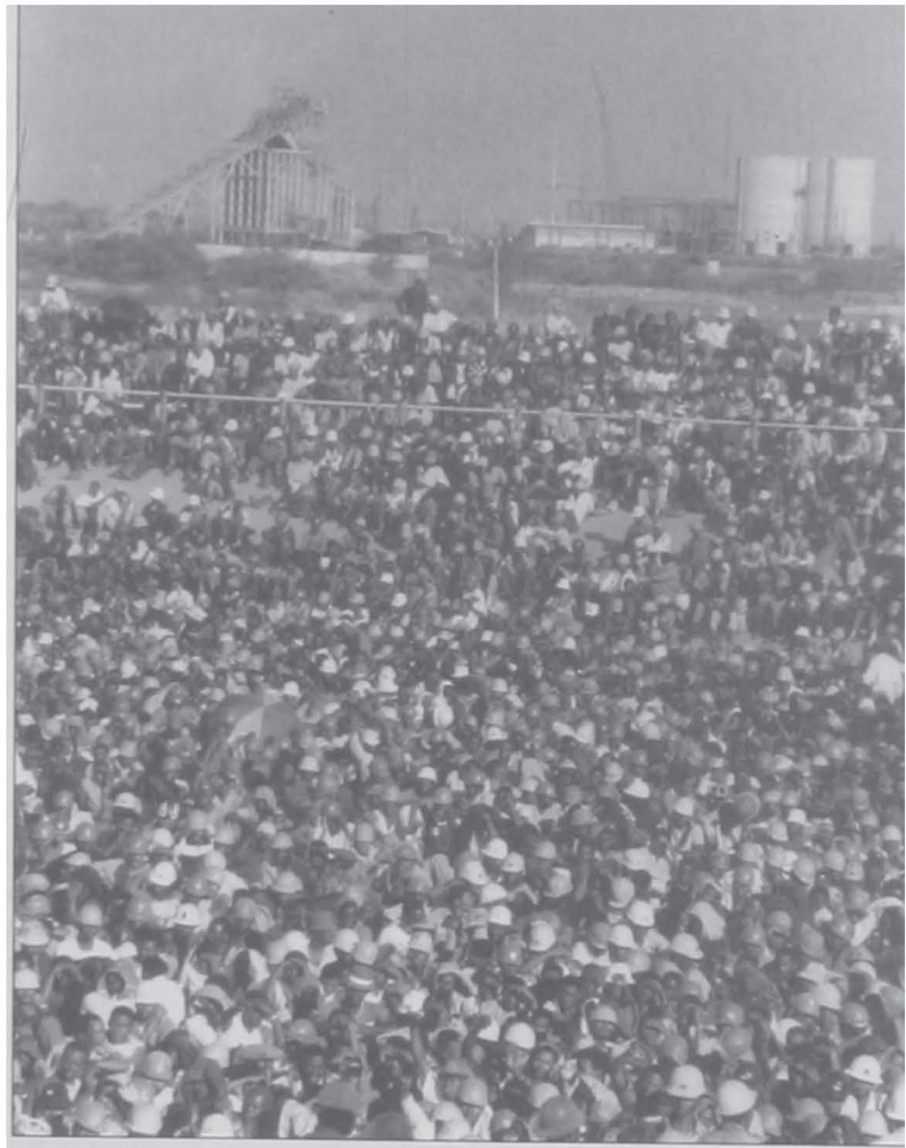
I include the labour movement as part of the above movements because it is largely still trapped within institutions, ideas and values of the national industrial capitalism within and against which it took shape. Trade unions and labour parties are national institutions, primarily oriented toward collective bargaining and social partnership.

Unions have generally been marked since the early 20th century by the 'iron law of oligarchy' – the notion that after early democratic and mobilising efforts, mass organisations come to be run top-down and not bottom-up. This is something that affects even radical or revolutionary organisation. Which is *not* to say that unions do not, or cannot, contribute to worker welfare, workplace rights or national-liberation movements. But it *is* to say that under conditions of a GNC, we should not expect them to be in the vanguard of popular empowerment, social transformation and internationalism (see Gaye Seldman, 2001).

The new movement

It is the 'anti-globalisation' or 'anti-capitalist' movement that are demonstrating the most appropriate form for both defence against and challenge to a GNC. What they do is not foreign to at least the newer trade union movements that exist in South Africa, Korea or Brazil. These new movements tend to network. They use low-tech and high-tech means of communication to both undermine the dominant powers and values, and propose newer, more democratic, and humane ones. These new movements – around such vital issues as food, housing, debt, water, racism and reparations, militarism, women, communication democracy and sexual minorities – are increasingly finding each other by 'naming the enemy' as corporate capitalism (Starr, 2000). They are also insisting that 'another world is possible' (World Social Forum, 2001) and working out its meaning collectively and globally.

While unions are still trying to work out *inter-nationalism* (relations between nations and nationalisms) (COSATU, 2001), the radical-democratic movements are developing a new kind of global solidarity. This solidarity is one that recognises global problems, amongst which relations between nations and nationalisms are but one.



The local labour movement provided a point of reference to the international labour movement.

Lessons for unions

Some unions and socialist parties are either resisting this movement, ambiguous about it, or trying to lead or control it. Others are recognising that by relating to this movement as an equal partner they can best serve their members and reach out to the rest of the working classes such as homeworkers, rural producers, housekeepers and the unemployed. This could ensure that labour issues are energetically forwarded within and by the new movement. (Actually, this movement increasingly does this, in the absence or even against the opposition of unions!)

No surprise, then, that this new

movement is inspiring millions, including workers, exercising considerable moral appeal, impacting on the dominant media, blocking action by the international financial institutions and contributing to the crisis of self-confidence currently afflicting the neoliberal globalisers.

None of this implies that the South African unions have to shut up shop. What it does mean is that their *first address* should be not to capital and state but to the new social movements now taking shape in South(ern) Africa. The social partnership of the future is with civil society, not capital and state. Today, to be successful, one needs the support of the rest of civil society.

Nor does the above imply that one has to be either within or without the Alliance. It can both stay in it *and* address itself to the new social forces and issues the Alliance fails to represent. This position is, after all, the implicit one of South African unions towards the ICFTU, insofar as some of them are simultaneously active within and beyond that organisation (for example with the Southern Initiative on Globalisation and Trade Union Rights). Nowadays, as the Latin American women's movement puts it, we need to move in our relationships from love to need!

Nor does it mean that the South African trade unions have to abandon their national identity. But, today, to be successful, every national or local organisation or action has to exist 'in the light of internationalism'. So networking has to take place locally, regionally and globally. It also has to take place between the unionised, non-unionised, non-unionisable workers. And between the labour movement and the other radical-democratic social movements.

A new Bulletin

As for the *Labour Bulletin* itself, I think it

has to reinvent itself as some kind of *South African Labour and Social Movement Bulletin* (preferably with a pronounceable acronym). This would focus it on relations between labour and the rest of civil society (women, community, human rights, rural, church, peace, etc). It would mean that the kind of material I refer to below might appear in the *Bulletin*. It might even increase sales – locally and internationally. It would prevent a reduction of the *Bulletin* to the art of the possible, at a time in which people and peoples are going to be increasingly questioning this and – in the spirit of the *Bulletin* in the 1970s to 1990s – demanding the impossible and making it possible. ★

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