

Preparing us for permanent opposition?

How important is trade union independence?

SACP general secretary

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responded to Copelyn and Zikalala's position on this issue and argued that this was important but that their arguments were so weak that they were likely to undermine the very cause they sought to defend.

In the last issue of the South African Labour Bulletin (March 1991) John Copelyn and Snuki Zikalala both defend the need for an independent trade union movement in a changing South Africa. They also both fiercely attack overlapping leaderships ('the wearing of two or more hats') within the alliance. I agree absolutely with them that trade union independence is of the greatest importance. Unfortunately, many of their arguments are so weak; they are likely to undermine the very cause they seek to defend.

While there may be some difference of

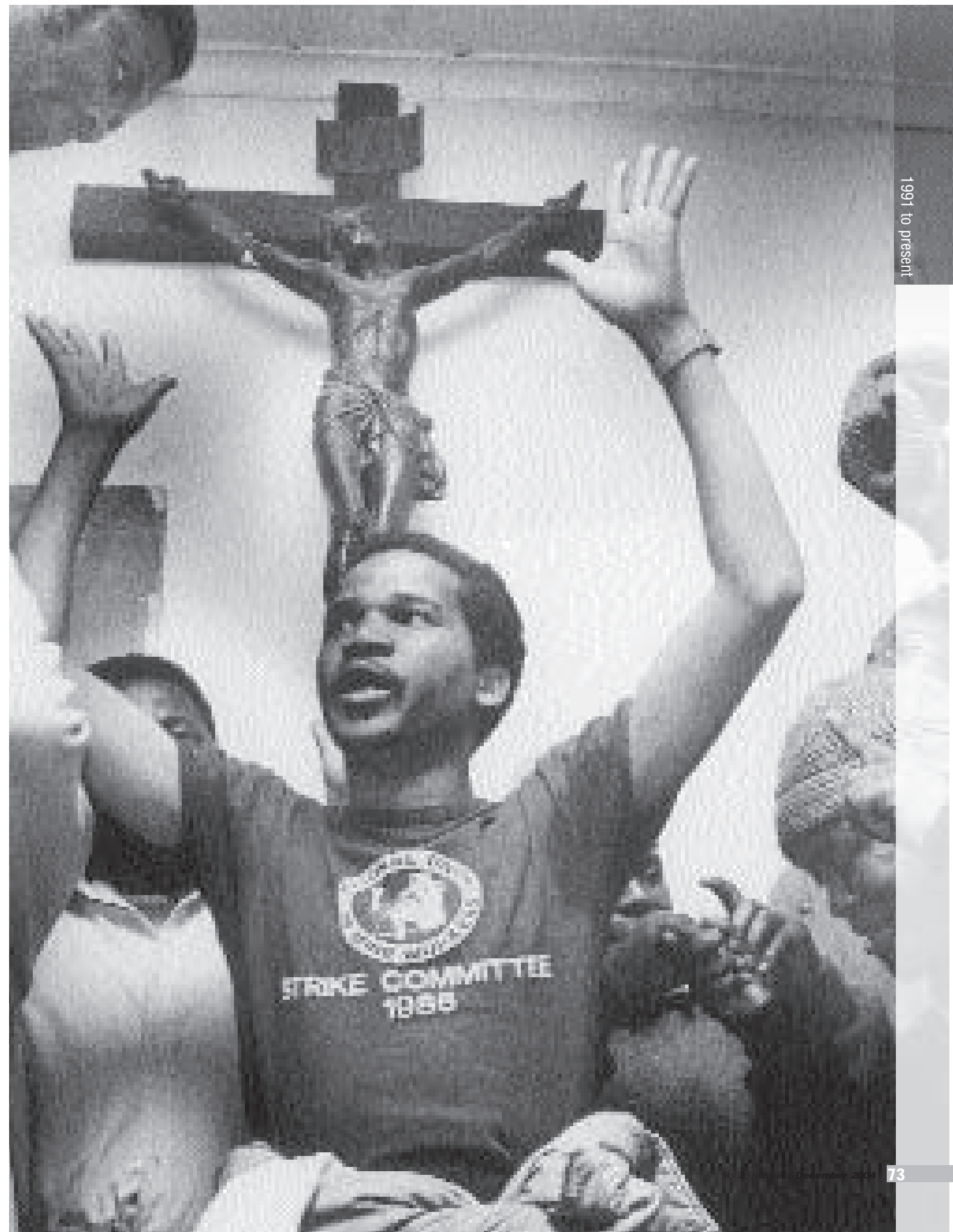
emphasis or outlook between Copelyn and Zikalala, one cannot help noticing the very important points of convergence between them. Perhaps the most basic convergence is the fact that they both approach the issue of overlapping leadership (the 'two hats' debate) with the same fundamental assumptions about wider political issues.

TRADE-OFF AT SUN CITY

Copelyn's article is a revised version of a paper first presented to the Annual Convention of the Institute for Personnel Management at Sun City in October last year. I am not going to argue that trade unionists should never travel to Sun City to speak to annual conferences of personnel managers. The real question is: What do you do when they get there? Copelyn uses the occasion to brief personnel managers about the debate within Cosatu on trade union independence, overlapping leaderships with the ANC and SACP, and related issues. He reassures his audience that his own view that 'union leadership cannot serve two masters, whether those masters are in alliance or not is gaining such ideological hegemony that I believe it is very likely to grow into the dominant position within the union movement'. But the emphasis is on 'very likely' - it is not yet certain.

Why is Copelyn so generously sharing all this information with management? He is using our debate as a point of leverage with them. He is taking it upon himself to sketch the outlines to his Sun City audience of a possible trade-off between unions and management. He is trying to convince personnel managers of the need for national collective bargaining. Unless there is national collective bargaining, he warns them, unions 'will have to focus their attempts on developing close ties with political parties which will give them access to state power'.

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In other words, give us national collective bargaining and do yourselves (and John Copelyn in his own particular ideological battle against the wearing of many hats) a favour. Otherwise, organised workers might start turning even more solidly to the ANC and SACP. If you don't want organised workers spearheading political challenges for state power, then you had better make some labour relations concessions.

WORKING CLASS AND STATE POWER

Copelyn correctly criticises the fixation, by socialists in the past, on the state as virtually the only instrument 'for transforming the quality of life of workers and the oppressed', and he links this fixation to the crisis of East European socialism. I agree with him that it is important, by contrast, to give 'a substantially greater role to the independent organisations of civil society - such as trade unions'. But it does not follow from this that workers should now abandon the contest for state power, or that a weak state is more desirable than a strong, democratic state that is able to carry through its democratically mandated policies. For Copelyn, however, the only issue of concern when it comes to state power is how to limit it. The ideal state for Copelyn is little more than a rubber stamp 'enacting in law the agreements reached by organised labour (with bosses) through collective bargaining'.

Totally absent from this incredibly limited and technical conception of the state is a notion that the state organises and defends class power (of course, in complex and often mediated ways). In the long run, in our situation, the state will either continue to operate in the interests of the bosses, or it will become a means for defending and advancing the interests of the working masses.

Copelyn seems not to believe that workers could one day wield democratic state power, and that their state could work in conjunction with their independent mass

democratic formations to smash the system of wage slavery once and for all. His conception of workers' (and their trade unions') relationship to the state is of perpetual opposition.

TWICE IN A DECADE

Zikalala presents a very similar, but even more shallow view of politics and the state. At least Zikalala is candid. He has an avowedly bourgeois, and a very conservative bourgeois understanding of politics. He says 'In South Africa after we have achieved our goals of non-racial democracy, we have to uplift the living standards of our people. This can only be done by trade unions persuading the employers to use part of the surplus value for the benefits of the workers'.

Why only trade unions? How about using democratic state power (including an independent and enlightened judiciary) in conjunction with trade unions, consumer bodies, civics, an independent and campaigning progressive press, and a host of other forms of institutional and organised mass pressure? And, more decisively, how about progressively abolishing wage slavery altogether? That though is simply unthinkable for Zikalala. Both Copelyn and Zikalala have a limited, entirely negative and permanently oppositionist view of politics and the state. The working class, organised into trade unions, becomes just another lobby.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE STATE BUREAUCRACY

Another and related point of convergence between Copelyn and Zikalala is their failure to distinguish between political parties and state bureaucracy. In this, ironically, they are uncritically repeating one of the great errors of Eastern European socialism. The present crisis of socialism is linked not only to the collapse of mass democratic movements into the state bureaucracy, but also to a similar conflation of ruling communist parties with

the bureaucracy.

According to Zikalala: 'A political party... acts through the institutions of the state and local authority. It is involved in parliamentary politics'. This may well be the case. But this does not mean that a political party in power should be indistinguishable from state institutions, or that out of power it should be no more than an electoral machine.

This is a crucial point, and it relates to one of the absolutely central issues of the present South African situation. As we rebuild a mass ANC and a relatively large SACP what are we trying to achieve? Are we simply building launching pads for MPs, or infrastructure for budding state bureaucrats now waiting impatiently in the wings? The ANC and the SACP that we are building must be formations with strong international democracy. They should have powerful grass-roots base structures that defend and advance the political and social interests of their members and their broader, popular, and in the case of the SACP, working class, constituencies. The ANC and SACP should constantly mobilise, campaign and educate day-to-day, and not just in election periods. They should be fighting formations, not just twice in a decade electoral machines. The party machinery should be independent of state structures, and be prepared to call to account party members in such structures.

We certainly do not want the unions to be a simple labour wing of an ANC (or SACP) government. But the overall working class cause, including the independence and very survival of real trade unionism in our country could be threatened if the new government in a nominally post-apartheid South Africa turns out to be a tripartite alliance, but with a difference - De Klerk, Buthelezi and Anglo American. Gone would be the worldwide anti-apartheid solidarity from which all our formations, not least the trade unions have benefited. In would come the AFL-CIO and the IMF, no longer restrained by the former

isolation of apartheid South Africa. The township wars would be spread strategically into the workplaces, and presented in the commercial media and now privatised TV as 'ordinary workers opposing left-wing extremists'. Bosses would start to deal only with Uwusa 'unions'. I think (and fervently hope) this scenario is unlikely. But it is not impossible.

BACK TO THE 'TWO HATS' DEBATE

I have chosen to come to this topical question last, against the background of all that I have just said. I have done this deliberately. Part of the problem with this debate is that it is often argued out abstractly, simply in the realm of general principles. Principles are important, but they must be applied to concrete realities. Can overlapping leaderships, the wearing of two or more hats, compromise the independence of trade unionist (or the independence, for that matter, of any other organisation)? Yes, obviously, such overlapping can compromise independence on all sides. There are precautions that can be taken, and the SACP has had extensive experience of these in its alliance with the ANC. Any SACP member serving in an ANC structure, whether as a leader or ordinary member, is, when he or she is operating within that structure, entirely under its democratic discipline.

No SACP members should carry a predetermined party-caucused line into a fraternal organisation, undermining its internal democracy. As a party we have tried (and perhaps we have sometimes failed) to be very strict and vigilant in these matters. I am not suggesting that individuals should be schizophrenic. Carrying a caucused line into another organisation in order to pre-empt its own internal democratic processes is very different from carrying a general outlook and understanding. Obviously one does not expect SACP leaders serving on the ANC NEC to forget that they had ever heard of Marxism. Clearly the Cosatu leaders serving in party leadership structures bring an important shopfloor understanding and their own democratic traditions into our ranks. Hopefully, they and their unions benefit in turn from the political and international

overview, and decades of experience that some of our party leaders have acquired.

In short, while in principle, there might be pitfalls with overlapping leaderships; there are also, in principle, enormous positive possibilities of mutual enrichment. How we weigh up the potential pitfalls against the potential advantages should be determined by actual conditions in a given time and place. It seems to me that the positive possibilities are particularly relevant in our present concrete situation. The ANC and SACP are emerging out of decades of illegality. We are trying to draw together many different strands - exiles, released political prisoners, those emerging from the deep underground, and tens of thousands of militants schooled in the past decade of mass democratic struggle. Neither the ANC nor the party belong exclusively to their pre-February 1990 membership or leadership. In particular, it is crucial that the hundreds of outstanding working class leaders thrown up by the trade union struggles in the last period, play an active and central role in the reconstruction of our political formations.

OVERLAPPING LEADERSHIPS

What about overlapping leadership and the problem of overloading and the resultant inefficiency? Again, this is a real danger, no doubt. But here too precautions can and need to be taken. We hope that it enables our party to benefit from the trade union comrades' experience and understanding without unduly overstressing them. Of course in real life taking precautions is never a guarantee. And that is why the two hats debate cannot be resolved simply in the abstract. Both Copelyn and Zikalala attempt to announce timeless principles. They both use the same phrase: 'You cannot serve two masters at the same time'. What exactly does it mean? As an ordinary, disciplined member of a civic and a trade union are you not 'serving two masters'? Are you not bound by their respective decisions? What if the one supports a stay-away and the other is opposed? We could go on speculating and multiplying potential pitfalls in this way forever. Obviously occupying several leadership positions increases the dangers of

possible conflict and of undermining independence. But where, abstractly, do you draw the line if you simply invoke the bald 'you cannot serve two masters' slogan?

Zikalala, in particular, ties himself in knots on this one. Not being able to serve two masters, he tells us, 'does not mean that a trade union leader cannot be active in his party branch or be elected to a party congress. Views of a trade union leader can be known but must avoid taking part where a political decision is made'. For heavens sake, what does Zikalala imagine happens in a party branch or party congress?

In short, yes, trade union independence is crucial for now, for the period of transition, and in a socialist future. Yes, overlapping leaderships pose serious challenges and real potential dangers, and if there is a need for such overlapping we need creatively to guard against negative outcomes.

But above all, let us anchor the two hats debate in the concrete circumstances of the present. We are involved in a complicated transition period, whose outcomes are far from clear. In this situation, from a working class perspective, the most critical organisational tasks are to build a powerful, mass-based, democratic and fighting ANC.

In the post-February 2 situation the ANC, understandably and correctly, has been drawing a very wide range of strata and ideological tendencies into its general orbit. We should not allow this important process of growth to undermine the long-standing working class bias of the ANC. In practical terms this means, amongst other things, that working class leaders need to be present at all levels of the ANC. It could be disastrous in the present situation if, in the name of trade union independence, Cosatu were to forbid working class leaders from occupying its rightful place in our political formations. It would not serve the cause of the working class, and nor, in my view, the long term prospects for a vibrant and independent trade union movement.

LB

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