

# Putting the ANC briefing notes to bed?

**T**he South African Communist Party (SACP) released its response to the briefing notes amid much concern as to what they actually represented. Cosatu and other activists questioned what the notes said about the Alliance and the African National Congress (ANC). In many respects, the SACP response sidesteps this question while at the same time revealing serious political inadequacies.

The SACP welcomed the briefing notes as being the catalyst for sparking a debate within the Alliance but at the same time, pointed to a number of incorrect and dangerous issues in the briefing notes. These include:

- ❑ The briefing notes attempted to avoid discussions on issues of difference that have emerged within the Alliance such as the growth, employment and redistribution strategy (Gear) and privatisation.
- ❑ The focus on the strength and influence of 'non and anti-ANC tendencies within Cosatu' could have the effect of enhancing the influence and prestige of anti-ANC forces in the trade unions and mass movement.
- ❑ The briefing notes have the potential to discourage debate.
- ❑ The briefing notes could lead to witch-hunts, a 'dogmatic closing of ranks' and deepening of divisions within the Alliance.

*The adoption of a 'briefing note' by the ANC's NEC last year, which accused elements in Cosatu of 'counter-revolutionary' and 'ultra-leftist' plans to launch a political party, remains a thorn in the side of some. Dinga Sikwebu concludes the SACP's response fails to take into account the changes taking place in the ANC.*

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While few will deny the dangers in the briefing notes as identified by the politburo, the SACP response still has glaring weaknesses. It fails to point out the real agenda behind the briefing notes.

## **The basis for the Alliance**

The briefing notes should not be seen in isolation of an attempt by the ANC leadership to re-organise the Alliance on a new basis – a basis where Cosatu and the SACP are more subordinate. This is not a new agenda. In fact, the briefing notes have huge 'cut-and-paste' chunks from an ANC NEC discussion document issued in October 2000. At the time, the national executive committee NEC document raised alarm bells on potential ultra-leftism within Cosatu.

A year down the line such a possibility has become real, according to the briefing notes. There exists a group within Cosatu that harbours political ambitions of the federation becoming the 'primary political home' of an ultra-left tendency, the briefing notes argue. If we are to believe the briefing notes, among the aims of this tendency is the transformation of Cosatu into a political formation independent of the ANC. The views of this tendency in Cosatu, the authors of the briefing notes claim, are 'often expressed as official policy of the federation'.

The evidence for claims of an ultra-left tendency, as identified by the authors of the briefing notes, is reflected in:

- ☐ Cosatu's decision to embark on a strike against privatisation;
- ☐ the determination to continue with the anti-privatisation campaign;
- ☐ persistent calls for an Alliance political centre and a common Alliance programme;
- ☐ a decision by Cosatu to call on its office bearers to step down from the ANC NEC;
- ☐ calls for an end to Gear and adoption of a new growth path;
- ☐ the decision by Cosatu to convene a People's Summit made up of 'organisations of civil society';
- ☐ Cosatu's criticism of the government position on Zimbabwe and HIV/AIDS;
- ☐ the 'tendency in the pronouncements of some of the senior leadership to seek media publicity at the expense of the ANC and government';
- ☐ the SACP's decision to relaunch itself 'as a mass party' being viewed as an accomplice to the 'left rebellion';
- ☐ calls for an Alliance political centre being viewed as an attempt to foster 'co-governance' against ANC leadership of the Alliance.

Mass struggle and independent mass

formations were viewed as threats that must be nipped in the bud. That is the message of the briefing notes but the SACP's response failed to reveal this. Welcoming the notes' reaffirmation of the Alliance is a political disservice. The briefing notes call for a different Alliance. One that is not a coordinator of struggle and transformation; one where Cosatu and the SACP are subordinate partners. Ultimately, the briefing notes propose a new basis for the Alliance - one that is different from the one agreed to on 9 May 1990 when the ANC-Cosatu-SACP Alliance was formally constituted.

## ANC and the working class

The briefing notes reflect the deep forces at play within the Alliance. They reveal attempts by the ANC to restructure its relationship with the working class so that the latter is nothing else but an electoral base. Secondly, they reflect what has been happening to the ANC as an organisation.

Since the ANC's move into governmental office, there has been an intensification of a campaign to restructure the relationship between the ANC and the working class. The struggles by the working class are not refracting through the ANC as the organisation has become 'struggle-shy'. The policies being pursued by the ANC government have been the target of criticism by key working class formations. The ANC is cutting itself adrift from the working class while at the same time there has been a weakening of the ANC as an organisation. It is common cause that branches through which the working class is supposed to express itself, are weak if non-existent. The ANC is no longer dependent on working class bodies and branches to drive policy formulation. What is even more critical is the relationship that has been developing between the ANC as an organisation and



*Cosatu members demonstrate against privatisation.*

the state.

At the centre of the disagreements in the Alliance is the fact the policy formulation does not reside in the ANC but in the state. Also important to note has been the transformation of the ANC in a way that makes the organisation mirror the state. Among many of the initiatives aimed at mimicking the state was the 1997 decision to hold national conferences every five years, similar to terms of government. Presently, the ANC is restructuring its branches so as to coincide with boundaries of local authorities.

With such fundamental changes taking place, it is surprising that the polithuro discussion document makes no references to what has been happening to the ANC as an organisation. Detaching the ANC from the working class requires a restructured Alliance. It requires an acquiescent SACP. It requires a Cosatu, which according to one leader in the federation, is nothing more

than an 'ANC Workers League'. Cosatu and the SACP are only useful insofar as they help manage discontent within the working class. A fighting Cosatu and an independent SACP are stumbling blocks in the big project of transforming the ANC into a party of capital with the working class as an electoral base.

A glaring weakness in the SACP polithuro discussion document is how the threat of muzzling debate posed by the briefing notes is linked to trampling of popular democracy at a societal level. Neoliberalism is the opposite of popular democracy. To succeed neoliberalism cannot afford a situation where policy options are opened to popular democratic decision making. Developments in other countries have demonstrated how under neoliberalism, power becomes concentrated in the executive and it is the economic ministries that wield power within the executive. These features are evident in our country.

In the last seven years we have witnessed a mushrooming of 'supposedly independent' regulatory authorities. Whether one deals with the Independent Communication Authority (ICASA) or the electricity regulator (NER), what is common with these structures is their cushioning from mass pressure and to varying degrees their accountability to the executive. Despite provisions for public hearings and nominations, there exists no direct accountability of these structures to the general populace. Compare these levels of unaccountability to their powers to determine policies that affect lives of ordinary people!

There is no doubt that power in South Africa lies in the presidency and the departments of finance and trade and industry. Has parliament given a mandate to offers that government has made to the World Trade Organisation (WTO)? How many times have union negotiators found that government departments they are engaging with were negotiating under the dictates of the finance ministry? The delays in passing legislation, as required by the constitution, that will enable parliament to initiate and amend money bills is a sign of unwillingness by the executive to cede power to the legislature.

The politburo document should have reflected on these developments, as the briefing notes do not only pose a threat to debate but are a reflection of a move to take policy options out of popular and democratically elected structures.

## Conclusion

What does the politburo document say about what the working class and its militants are supposed to do? Except a call not to 'deepen divisions' within the Alliance as well as an appeal to prove the 'ultra-left argument' wrong, one does not find a clearer definition of tasks for the

working class and its activists. A call on militants to do nothing to exacerbate the tensions in the Alliance without a proper assessment of what the briefing notes represent and how they reflect class realignment, has the potential to do the very thing that the politburo document warns against - 'a dogmatic closing of ranks'. Even more bizarre is the assertion that the immediate task is to prove the incorrectness of the 'non and anti-ANC tendencies' within the mass movement. Having conceded that 'the principle strategic threat to the NDR' does not remotely come from these tendencies, it is baffling to read that the task in the coming months is to prove the ultra-left wrong.

The politburo argument is simple: the ANC's briefing notes have the potential to stifle debate but more serious is that they pose a 'very real danger to play straight into the hands of the ultra-left' who will say, 'we always told you so', so let us prove the ultra-left wrong. Ironically, therefore, the politburo concludes that the task is to deal with the 'ultra left', which the briefing notes say must be defeated. The only difference is that the ANC NEC thinks that such a tendency is influential as its views 'are often expressed as official policy of the federation'. But the politburo moves from the basis that such a tendency is a 'significant minority within Cosatu'.

Maybe there will be differences in dealing with the tendency! Maybe class militants and their organisations should not focus on the transformation of the ANC. They should not focus on class realignment that is taking place and reflected in the briefing notes. They should also not be concerned with the curtailing of popular democracy. They must disregard moves to divide their labour movement into private and public sectors. They must be unmindful of



Pic: Nigel Dennis

### *Where are they now?*

attempts to divide the Cosatu leadership from affiliates. They should also ignore what are clear attempts to cow both Cosatu and SACP. The focus should instead be on the 'insignificant ultra-left'.

This appears to be the advice-through-omission contained in the politburo discussion document. The document reflects on how in the past the ultra-left was dealt with. According to the politburo discussion document 'in the second half of the 1970s, the most significant non-ANC left emerged within the trade unions'. We are told that the SACP in 1985, noting 'the growing strength of the workerists', launched a campaign not 'to allow socialism to be monopolised by an anti-ANC tendency'.

This is a counter-distinction to the briefing notes which characterise the present 'left rebellion' as counter-revolutionary. The politburo discussion document points to how the campaign to defeat the ultra-left in the 1980s was fought on a principled basis. According to the document 'the ultra-left and workerists

were always treated as part of the broad people's camp. They were never treated as if they were the enemy or an imperialist conspiracy'. The battle was 'intense and comradely'. Those who were part of the fight that led to splits in Mawu, MWASA and Ccawusa may be in a better position to say how 'intense and comradely' the battles were. Delegates at the 1987 Cosatu national congress who were scolded and threatened by Peter Mokaba to adopt the Freedom Charter if they wanted to escape being labeled 'political hobos', may be able to tell us about the 'comradely' struggle that made the SACP hegemonic within Cosatu. One has to also consult editions of the *African Communist* and *Sactu's Workers Unity* to see how comradely the battles were. They are there for all us to learn. For it to provide valuable lessons it should not be sanitised.

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