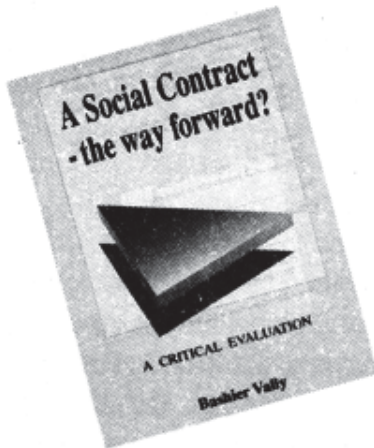


● accepting – and not just as interim measures – that the market and representative democracy need to be defended for the freedoms (although imperfect) which they contain.

This is, however, a necessary development. As Robin Blackburn points out: “As we enter the last decade of the twentieth century, the ruin of Marxist-Leninist Communism has been sufficiently comprehensive to eliminate it as an alternative to capitalism and to compromise the very idea of socialism. Today’s moribund ‘Great Power Communism’ is not a spectre stalking the globe but an unhappy spirit, begging to be laid

to rest” (p 173).

For those of us disgruntled with the failure of the classical Marxist tradition to provide a workable alternative to Soviet-style communism, but who believe that the struggle against the capitalist system is far from over, this book marks an excellent move in the correct direction. It is a great pity that the South African Communist Party has chosen to ignore the very real lessons of history which this book so effectively highlights, and, like Alexander Cockburn’s friend, they have preferred to close their eyes and pretend that nothing ever happened. ☆



**A social contract
- the way forward?
A critical evaluation
By Bashier Vally
(Phambili Books
Johannesburg, 1992)**

Reviewed by LANGA ZITA

From De Loor* to Enoch Godongwana, from Geoff Schreiner to Barend du Plessis (before his knock out by NUMSA’s Fanaroff), the social contract is the buzz word as South Africa slowly moves away from formal apartheid, and debates over economic strategies attempt to move with the times.

In this context, Bashier Vally’s slim volume on the social contract is a welcome, although introductory, contribution to this debate. He has two main objectives in this book. His first is to introduce the basic concept of the social contract. His second is to offer a dismissal of this project.

1 What is a social contract?

At the outset, it is necessary to point out some concerns in relation to Vally’s understanding of the social contract. On page 3 he says “the terms ‘social contract’ and ‘corporatism’ are

used interchangeably”. In this context corporatism is the same as social democracy and social accord.

I am not comfortable with this. Firstly, it seems to me that corporatism has various faces - one of which is fascism! Secondly, whilst the participating parties are the same (state, labour, capital) in all these forms of corporatism, particular historical, economic and ideological factors are important in understanding the subtle differences that exist, for example, between the corporatism of Australia and that of Sweden.

A social accord that might be agreed in this period of transition in South Africa would have a different character yet again. It seems to me that to conflate these modes of corporatism is not helpful at all.

Vally is relatively successful in his initial undertaking when he looks at the current debates in South Africa on the social contract. In this regard, he quotes the *Business Day* (19/2/91) which argues that, “South Africa’s ‘haves’ must

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always be aware that, not least for reasons of their own security, they cannot exclude this country's most disadvantaged people from the coming new deal."

Previously the same paper had sermonised: "If there is sufficient in a deal to advance the interests of all contending parties, an arrangement can be realised/reached. A powerful incentive for South Africa to aim in this direction is, to coin a phrase, the ghastliness of the alternative."

These sentiments are echoed by leading figures of the labour movement although inspired by different motivations. For instance, COSATU assistant general secretary, Sam Shilowa, does not dismiss the possibility of a social contract when he says, "a social accord is not something that we should rule out, but it is something for which the climate does not exist at the moment" (*SA Labour Bulletin* Vol 16 No 3).

NUMSA's Geoff Schreiner and Enoch Godongwana are more clear on the need for a social contract which they see as having the ability to "culminate in socialism", provided mass involvement and a socialist perspective is maintained (*SA Labour Bulletin*, Vol 16 No 1 and No 4 respectively).

Will the views of these different actors in South Africa lead to a social contract? Vally comprehensibly shows - even though in the abstract - that all parties benefit in a social contract though to different degrees. For now he considers that "whether this will result in the conclusion of a social contract remains unclear?" (p 10).

2 What are the alternatives?

Having given the background and clarified the concepts, Vally goes to his second objective which is to look at the problems of a social contract. Whilst this section is pregnant with interesting insights, its verdict for the South African working class is, for Vally, very clear: Do not enter a social contract!

The important question is: what is the alternative?

There appears to be truth when Bill Freund says (*SA Labour Bulletin*, Vol 16 No 5) that the ANC and the SACP are content with preserving

the present socio-economic status quo (with the racism removed). This is acknowledged by leading thinkers of the congress movement such as Rob Davies (cited in *Workers' Voice*, No 3, June 1992).

If this is the case, is it realistic in the present conjuncture, to argue for an alternative? What is such an alternative? Is an alternative (a possible socialist revolution, or militant abstentionism) possible or correct in the interim without the involvement of the Congress Alliance? Whilst Vally, by his rejection of the social contract implies this perspective, or some version of it, he is however silent on an alternative.

To put the question in another way: which is better in the current situation, unbridled capitalism or a social contract? Vally does not enter into the demanding arena of positing a way forward. He says as he wants to avoid being like "academics in the universities (who prescribe) to the labour movement from the side lines(p iv)". But is this the case? Is he really "short on prescription and speculation", as he claims to be?

I would argue that, like anyone involved in this debate so far, Vally, though apparently carefully 'balanced', does take sides on the issue. In order to maintain his apparent neutrality in this debate, Vally has to evade the challenge of coming openly with an alternative to the social contract. This, to me, is his major shortcoming.

The strength of this book is in its ability to introduce us to the debate on the social contract. It succeeds in painting the broad picture and introducing the key concepts and key commentators on the subject. It is also a strength that it is critical, although in a very generalised way, on the social contract. Its major weakness is the fear to probe the unknown and to posit the way forward for the working class in South Africa.

Maybe what we ought to await is not a convincing argument on the pros and cons of the social contract (important as this is), but rather an argument on what is the best way to advance the socialist struggle in the current period in South Africa. This has to be the yard stick by which commentators on the way forward have to be measured. ☆