

Constructing consensus

Back in 1991 when the political negotiation process was on the brink of collapse many activists, especially in the trade unions, began to raise critical questions about the ANC and the manner in which it was conducting the negotiations with the apartheid government

The criticisms pertained to the style of leadership, undemocratic practices and the absence of any strategic approach to the negotiations. As one unionist put it "We comrades who were active inside the country thought the exiled leadership were without faults. We did not take into account the effects of exile, of being far from home, of working underground. When the ANC was unbanned we noticed problems, we lost the culture that had been established between the UDF and COSATU"

A lot has changed since 1994. Vibrant, open debate and criticism has been replaced by the view that criticising the ANC is undesirable, unpatriotic and racist. Elements of the old order are still hard at work trying to destabilise the democratic order led by the ANC. Any criticism is regarded as playing into the hands of those elements. The substance of the criticism is not addressed. This has engendered fear amongst some and discomfort amongst others. The result is a false sense of consensus.

Dale McKinley's book is a welcome and

Sakbela Bublungu reviews "The ANC and the liberation struggle: a critical political biography", by Dale McKinley (Pluto Press, 1997)

timely contribution to the debate about the character of the transition in South Africa. The book presents an historical critique of the character and direction of the ANC (and the SACP), with a specific focus on the relationship between the objective conditions in which the struggle was conducted and the strategic and tactical choices the organisation made.

Leadership

McKinley adopts a Marxist-Leninist analysis. He argues that the petty bourgeois character of the ANC's leadership shaped the choices it made at different times in the struggle. Since its inception, the organisation has alternated between activity and dormancy. "As long as there was some sort of immediate crisis or new law to be opposed the ANC responded with varying degrees of activity and resistance. However, once their responses had either been suppressed, undermined by co-option or had failed on their own terms, the ANC lapsed into a state of near paralysis until the next round

of favourable circumstances was presented." (p 9) This "revolutionary zig-zag" resulted from a "reluctance and/or perceived inability" to take grassroots organising seriously.

The evidence suggests that leadership devoted a disproportionate amount of resources and energy to those strategies which were within their comfort zones. Of the 'four pillars' of the struggle - mass mobilization, underground work, armed struggle and international campaigns - only the last received full dedication by the leadership, leading to what McKinley calls the "internationalisation of the struggle".

Exile had the negative effect of distancing leadership from the masses, with all the associated problems of leading from the outside. Throughout the period of exile and after its unbanning, ANC strategy and tactics continued to show bias towards those activities which did not involve grassroots organising. These included international campaigns, the courting of local and international business, and the 'fetishisation' of negotiations. The ANC has not been organisationally strong since its unbanning, despite the fact that its support base was so huge. Things have got worse since 1994, when many leaders moved to parliament and the civil service. As one ANC leader remarked, "the ANC outside of government has become a 'shell' based at Shell House".

How did it come to pass that a movement which had so much potential for attaining a radical transformation ended up settling for a truncated form of liberation? McKinley offers two explanations which underpin the whole book: the "dominant petit-bourgeois class interests" of leadership were not conducive to a close identification with the interests of the working class, and

leadership's conscious strategy of political accommodation "bound the interests of the ANC much more closely to those classes who held the reins of (or had greater access to) political and economic power". (p 9)

The rest of the book is devoted to developing and illustrating these arguments, using material gathered from a variety of sources, including the ANC's archives. In the light of developments since 1993 (the end of the period covered by the book) there can be no doubt that its significance goes beyond the period it deals with. The framework it presents is as useful for understanding the ANC in the past as it is for understanding the organisation's present and future. Most importantly, it challenges the false consensus which notions of 'reconciliation', 'unity' and the 'rainbow nation' seek to entrench.

Elitism

The value of the critique notwithstanding, the book contains a number of shortcomings. The most serious of these is the elitist approach to organisation, which leads to an almost exclusive focus on the actions and decisions of national leaders. The role of rank-and-file members is ignored. We are not told how leaders persuaded members to accept their decisions. How was dissent dealt with? The problem is not simply that McKinley does not address these issues. It seems to stem from his notion of the distribution and exercise of power in an organisation.

His obsession with leadership intrigues has blinded McKinley to the fact that strategy and tactics do not emerge in isolation of the actual struggles being fought by members. How did members, many of whom were drawn from the ranks of the working class, deal with a

leadership committed to the politics of accommodation? Did they break away and form organisations led by working class leaders? Did they support and seek to elect working class candidates within the ANC? Did they form alliances and voting blocks to defeat unpopular positions? If none of these, why not?

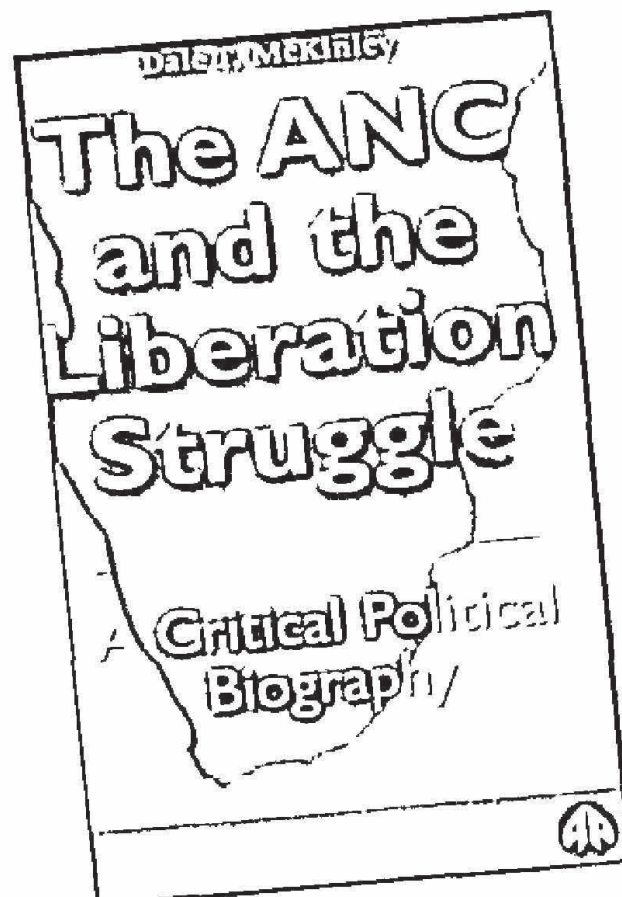
The author may well have found it difficult to answer these questions, because he did not interview members and local leaders to get their perspectives. This is not a minor quibble. It is a fundamental problem associated with most of the studies looking at the dynamics of organisation and struggle. While there is nothing wrong with McKinley expressing his own political positions, giving the 'victims' their own voice would have enriched his work and enhanced the stature of his claims.

The title of the book suggests a full study of the ANC and the liberation struggle. This shortcoming, and the fact that the author neglects to place the ANC in the whole spectrum of activities and organisations in the South African liberation struggle, ensures that the book is not about the ANC *per se*, nor is it about the liberation struggle.

Complexities

The relationship of the ANC with other formations of the liberation movement is far more complex than the book would seem to suggest. The only substantial reference to the ANC's relations with COSATU appears on page 70 and is premised on the simplistic and inaccurate notion that after COSATU leaders travelled to Lusaka in 1986, the new federation became 'incorporated' into the alliance. (p xi)

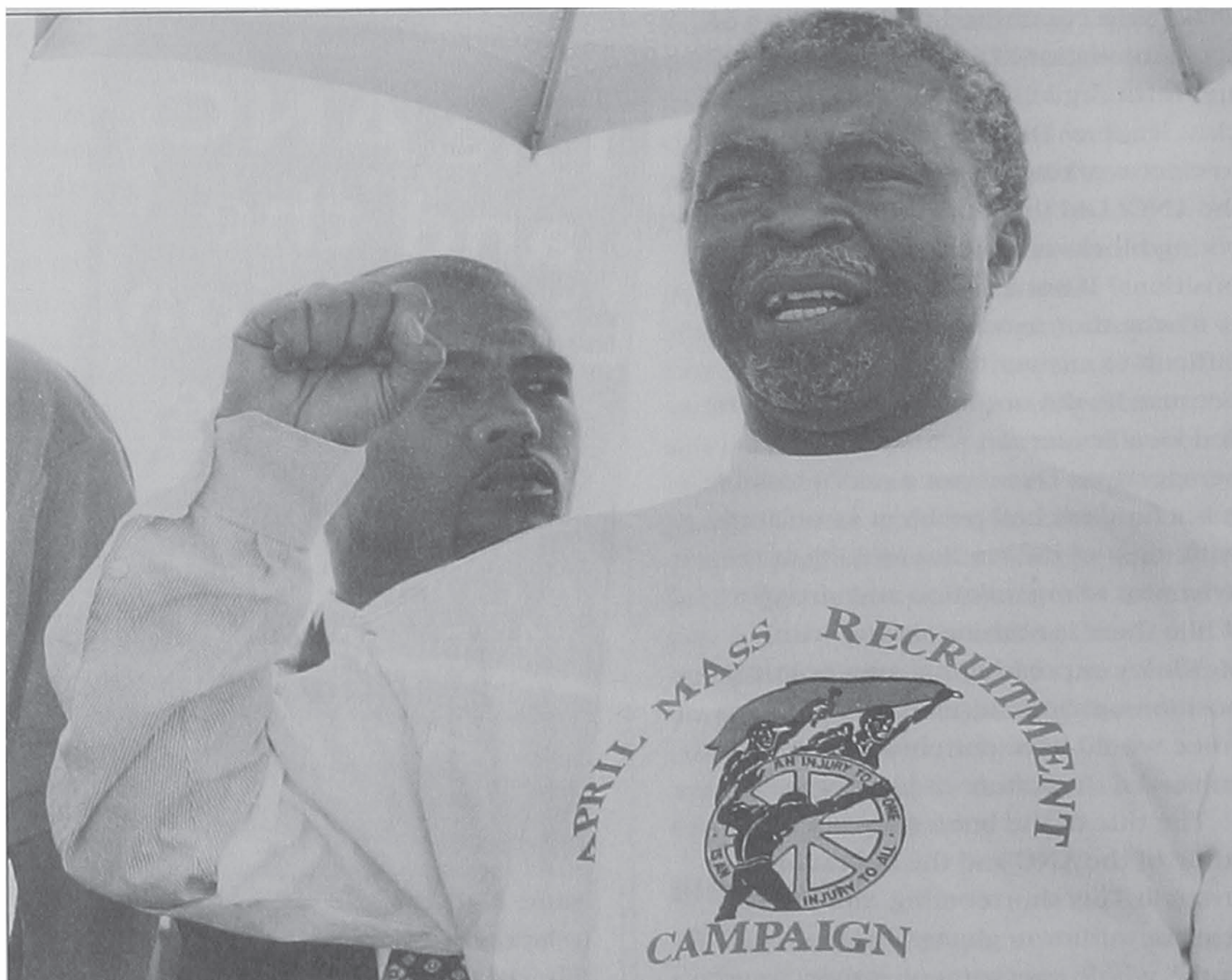
Debates within COSATU up until about 1993 tell a different story. The relationship was, in fact, both cordial and hostile. The



same could be said about the ANC's relationship with a whole array of other liberation organisations.

There are certain respects in which the book mystifies more than it clarifies. Take the nebulous category, 'leadership', upon which so much of the book is pivoted. There was the leadership in exile, those in jail and then there were leaders of those internal mass organisations, which to all intents and purposes were ANC formations under different names. McKinley does not examine these distinctions at all. Why, on the unbanning of the ANC, did certain leaders belonging to internal organisations become marginal, while some sprung into prominence and are today in key positions in the ANC?

Finally, McKinley makes a number of broad brush statements which are based on inaccurate facts or a misreading of the facts. COSATU's incorporation into the alliance is one example. Another is the



Thabo Mbeki at a COSATU meeting, 23 April 1998.

reference to 'comtsotsis' as enforcers of boycotts and administrators of 'people's justice'. (p 74)

It is true that these actions antagonised many township residents. But the division was not one between politicised residents and wayward 'comtsotsis'. In fact, in most cases 'comtsotsis' had nothing to do with enforcement, which was usually handled by committed youths (and some adults) who often went beyond what was required to gain support or deter unacceptable behaviour.

The term 'comtsotsi' referred to the criminal element made up of mainly youths who always took advantage of struggle activities to make personal gain. I seem to remember being involved in

enforcing some boycotts, and it might have been part of 'unguided missile' politics, but that certainly did not make me a 'comtsotsi'!

Notwithstanding these points, McKinley has written a bold and provocative book which is like a breath of fresh air in these suffocating times. It provides a framework within which to understand what is going on around us. It should not, however, be taken as the last word on the important matters it addresses ★

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