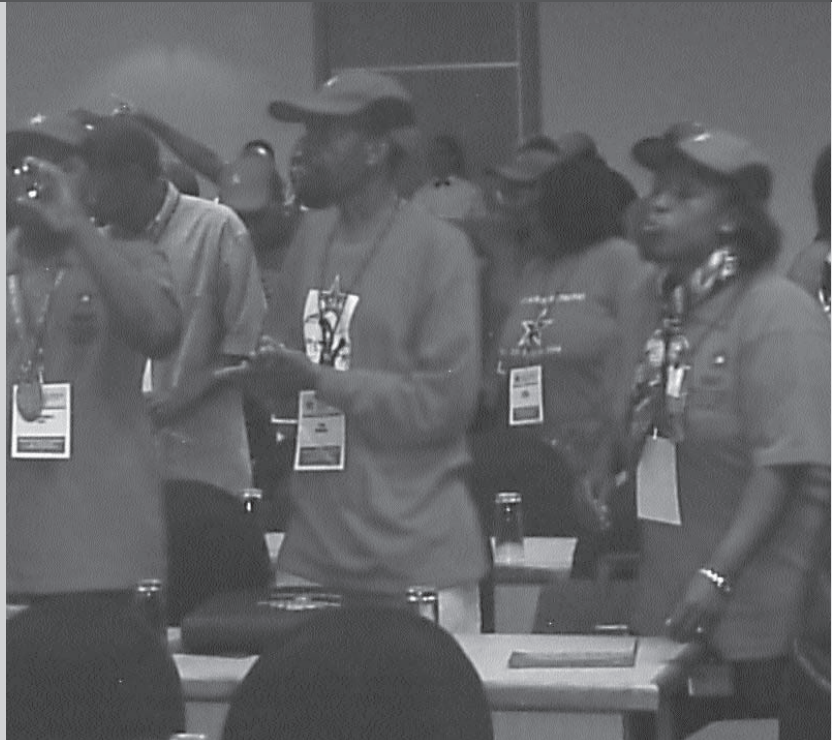


# SACP

## radical movement of the left or part of government?

The SA Communist Party's special national congress in April made headlines when claims were made that it might 'go it alone' and contest elections. The **Labour Bulletin** explores this debate and whether the proposal for independent candidates was an attempt to break the alliance.



**A**head of the South African Communist Party (SACP) special national congress the media focused on whether the Party planned to breakaway from the tripartite alliance in view of a draft resolution and discussion document on whether the Party should have its own independent candidates standing for elections. What was not properly explored in the mainstream media was that the proposal for the SACP to have its own independent candidate did not automatically mean that there was an equal amount of support to break the alliance. Nor was there sufficient attention given to the agendas of those who supported the 'go it alone' strategy. Some of the media focused mainly on the Young Communist League - but were they the only grouping supporting this move?

The idea of the Party contesting elections is not new and before the organisation was banned in 1950 it used to put up candidates in local and national elections as described by the Party's Gauteng secretary Vishwas Satgar in a paper distributed ahead of the conference. Satgar supports a move for the Party to have its own independent candidates for election. Satgar indicated in his paper (see p49) that it had been written with the permission of the Party's central committee and was aimed at 'moving the debate beyond a pro- or anti- ANC issue or the normal for or against the tripartite alliance debate'. He does not openly advocate a split in the alliance. He is more measured and proposes, at this stage, a negotiated power sharing arrangement with the ANC.

'Thus far the argument of this document has been weighted against what has been called the 'ANC path to socialism' position. On the other extreme, and which is an imminent possibility given the trajectory of the SACP, is a position espousing a 'protracted break' from the ANC. This position approaches the alliance relationship in a tumultuous manner that will eventually lead to a fractious break with the ANC when the SACP is supposedly strong enough to contest state power. The breakaway scenario from the ANC will have fundamental ramifications in the ANC and within the ranks of the organised working class. Besides the conflict, hostility and enmity that could result from this kind of approach, the risks for the National Democratic Revolution are very great - the evolution and maturation of

democracy in South Africa could be stopped in its tracks.

Hence, there is a strong argument for an electoral option for the SACP based on a negotiated power sharing arrangement with the ANC. Rather than contesting against the ANC, the SACP should contest elections where it is strongest - organisationally and in terms of influence - with ANC support and vice versa. This is not the 'big bang' election contest route in which the SACP raises the stakes on everything for everyone.

In practice, an election contest based on the strength of the SACP could work as follows: if an SACP branch in a particular community is well organised and has the trust and support of the community, then the SACP should lead the joint alliance election's effort in that constituency - that is, the SACP would provide the candidate for the election in that community with the support of all ANC members and structures in that area. In the current situation, such an approach to power sharing with the ANC will merely give the SACP a toehold or slight inroad into the formal political system and will not threaten the lion's share of the ANC's electoral support. Such a modest positioning and sharing of power in the political system should be sufficient for the SACP to start taking responsibility through the state for its programmatic objectives. Such a formal tactical electoral agreement with the ANC could remain in place for ten years.

The tactical electoral agreement envisaged will cover both local government elections and national/provincial elections. In short, the alliance will have a common election platform and campaign, but the SACP will have its own list of candidates based on the constituencies to be contested, which would be agreed to with the ANC. All SACP candidates elected would be directly accountable to the SACP and mechanisms would need to be put in place by the SACP to ensure this happens.

While Satgar does explore the type of

responses which could emerge from the ANC to such a proposal, the reality is that the ANC could refuse to negotiate any deal that is different from the present arrangement whereby SACP members in parliament are viewed as ANC representatives. What are the alternatives? The Party having its own candidates against ANC candidates and seek a coalition after the elections? What happens if the ANC decides to withdraw dual membership, is that a possibility?

Aside from Satgar (and the Gauteng region), which other groupings supported the Party contesting the next elections?

- The Young Communist League - it has been suggested that the politics amongst the League members is increasingly being defined by their battle with the ANC Youth League - hence their desire to push for the Party contesting the elections.
- A grouping from the Nelson Mandela Metro in the Eastern Cape who want to fight the local government elections. It is unclear exactly who is the main driver behind this group. On the surface, it appears to be dominated by workers - predominantly young Numsa shop stewards. But is that the full picture?

It is clear that the national leadership do not want a split with the alliance, but what about these other groupings, some of which might be motivated by localised issues or frustrations with their counterparts in rival organisations. Is that sufficient justification to end the alliance, when your existing base is only in the region of 30 000? A split would inevitably force people to choose whether to align themselves with either the Party or the ANC as the majority of prominent SACP members are also members of the ANC. In the same way there are far more Cosatu members who are members of the ANC than of the Party.

There appears to be a general sense within the leadership that the 'alliance climate' has improved considerably. This could be the result of a number of factors

- The anti-left campaign (from after the 1999 elections) backlashed to some extent on the ANC as ordinary ANC members are having to deal with the realities of some of the problems raised by Cosatu etc;
- The macroeconomic policies adopted from 1996 onwards were never accepted fully within the ranks of the ANC; and
- The presidential ten-year review revealed some of the problems, which exist and need to be addressed if the ANC is not only to consolidate but also keep its powerbase.

The problems revealed through the so-called two economies analysis provide opportunities for the alliance partners to engage on future policy. An attempt was made at the conference to centre the debate on these types of issues and how workers and the poor have benefited - but not fundamentally because the society has not been properly transformed. The election debate however, dominated and took the spotlight away from some of the real issues that the Party should be grappling with, namely, how to set the agenda in the coming years so that it focuses on developing a 'programme-centred activism that links with the needs and concerns of local communities and workers.'

Satgar argues in his paper that the 'fundamental political and strategic question for the SACP is how to work with the ANC to implement their common historical minimum programme rather than how to maintain the ANC's third world national liberation movement character. How is the SACP going to do this in such a way that it ends its politics of collective opportunism and prevents itself becoming a reformist Communist Party with radical rhetoric? More sharply, how does the SACP end its left-wing watchdog role over the ANC and get on with the serious tasks of creating capacity, momentum and commitment to elements of socialism while still being in the alliance?'