

Social movements in South

Challenges to organised labour and opportunities for renewal

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) highlighted the existence of organisations to the left of the traditional Alliance structures. Leonard Gentle analyses the political significance of the rise of new social movements in South Africa within the context of an international trend of the 1980s and 1990s wherein new social movements arose as the traditional formations of the working class either collapsed or abandoned the defence of the living standards of ordinary people.

On 31 August some 25 000 people marched from Alexandra to the Sandton venue of the WSSD. The march was organised by the Social Movements United, comprising, principally, the Landless People's Movement (LPM) and the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), but was joined by dozens of international anti-globalisation groupings that had converged on the country for the summit.

The Alex march, against all odds, is significant in that it marks the most public expression of the break of large sections of the working class and the rural poor with the liberation alliance and the political identification of the ANC government as the new oppressor. The march brought together a range of social movements and opened the way to a possible broad opposition movement of the left. The fragility of the new social movements, their vulnerability to attacks by the state and the divisions between themselves and an industrial base of organised workers suggest that a movement worthy of that name is still some way off. But such a movement is no longer a distant abstraction.

The significance of the new social movements

Globalisation is a response by capital to the crises of profitability of the 1960s and early 1970s. It involves both a shift in power within capital and a restructuring of the relations between capital and the working class.

Africa

Internationally. This restructuring involved the tearing up of the old 'social democratic consensus' in which capital accumulation took place within a regulating welfare state, a ready availability of credit, high levels of employment and mass consumption. The restructuring of the relations between labour and capital in the advanced capitalist countries under globalisation was combined with the restructuring of the relations between the imperialist countries and the poor countries of the South. Structural adjustment programmes were used to reverse governments' attempts at import substitution and agricultural and manufacturing diversification.

This restructuring would not have been possible without the defeat of the working class in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Central to this defeat was the destruction or capitulation of the traditional organisations of the working class – the social democratic parties and trade unions of the North and the trade unions and the radical national liberation movements in the South. This process was exacerbated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the mass communist parties of southern Europe. The shift of the Chinese communists to neoliberalism, together with the earlier crushing of their equivalents in south-east Asia meant that the restructuring of capital could take place on the backs of a defeated working class.

The outcome of these defeats in the 1980s and 1990s is that the old social democratic parties in Europe ditched the welfare state and when re-elected in the late 1990s largely extricated themselves from their old working class base and instituted neoliberal policies. In the US and Canada the new democrats of the Clinton-era took on

the republican programme of cutting social expenditure. The communist parties either dissolved or re-invented themselves as neoliberals in the ex-Soviet bloc countries. The trade unions in Europe, Australia and New Zealand embraced co-determinism as they sought to make their countries internationally competitive. The concerns of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) became that of seeking social clauses to trade agreements and adding a 'social dimension' to globalisation.

In the developing countries the governments were cowed into structural adjustment programmes or became market messiahs for the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Largely they dragged their trade union 'liberation allies' along with them. Where trade unions rose in opposition to corrupt governments, as

in Zimbabwe and Zambia, the unions themselves became the bridgehead for neoliberal prescriptions in order to 'save the economy'.

By the late 1990s all the traditional organisations of the working class had long ceased to contest the cause of the poor and had become agents of their defeat. It is, therefore, noteworthy that when activists began to fight back their first critics were the traditional formations or what came to be called the 'old left'. It is this political vacuum that has given the social movements that arose in the 1990s the character of being 'new' in a sense of being distinct from the history and concerns of the 'old left'.

The new movements have been notable in the North by the anti-globalisation formations at Seattle, Genoa, Stockholm and Prague and by the local anti-privatisation struggles in





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Bolivia, Mexico and the Philippines, amongst others, in the South.

A number of countries in the South, however, had never had the mass formations of the old left or been part of the old 'social democratic consensus'. Notable here were late industrialising countries in which industrialisation was pursued under repressive regimes – notably Brazil, South Africa and Korea. In these countries democracy has been a new phenomenon and there is still a sense of continuity with issues which were the stuff of debate within the left – political power in the state, political parties, class struggle etc.

The new social movements in SA

The new social movements in South Africa – such as the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC), the Concerned Citizens of Chatsworth, the APFs etc – have all been notable for new militant layers of activists who have not been part of the struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. They are grappling with defence of livelihoods against local government attacks and what the relationship between local struggles and national policies are. At the same time they are experimenting with different forms of organisation.

A number of milestones can be said to mark the journey towards the mass

challenge that these movements have now come to represent. Key amongst these milestones were the marches organised by the Chatsworth Concerned Citizens during the World Conference on Racism, the convening of a National Exploratory Workshop by the Anti-Privatisation Movement in 2001 and the confrontation between the SECC and the police outside the home of the mayor of Johannesburg.

The struggles that have ensued in this period are no longer about 'crisis of delivery' issues, but are responses by communities to attacks by the state's neoliberal policies – chiefly service cut-offs and housing evictions. These initiatives are not about the disappointment of lack of delivery but about a clear sense that the ANC is a party of the rich and that this government is as capable of violent evictions of poor people as its apartheid predecessor. This is a seismic shift and marks a whole new phase of development in struggles in South Africa. The fact that these struggles are occurring in a generalised lull gives them a dual character: on the one hand they are defensive, localised, issue-driven struggles and on the other hand they have already made the programmatic leap of confronting the class character of the ANC state.

The issue of locality is deeply bound to the experience of the urban and rural poor of the attacks on their living standards – as attacks by the institutions of local government. They have thus been defensive struggles against the immediate oppressor – the local government functionary cutting off their water, evicting workers from their houses or suspending electricity connections.

Significantly, it has been the institutions of local government that have been the focus of attention. While being given additional responsibilities

for delivering services local municipalities have had their transfers from the national fiscus drastically cut. (McDonald and others) Cost-recovery and collecting of payments has become the leitmotif of the officers of local municipalities. And, therefore, against the promises of 'a better life for all' and the expectations that after apartheid things would be better, living standards for the black working class have worsened. After 20 years of local residents boycotting service payments in protest against the apartheid organs of local government, now it is an ANC local government attempting to force the poor to pay. And so evictions from houses, water and electricity cut-offs (almost one million according to a recent study by McDonald and others) have become the order of the day in the townships around Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town.

But this begs another question: Why have these struggles not as yet found the connections across space that could potentially unite them? Here an important factor, one that also begins to give the social movements the character of being 'something new' is the absence of any participation of the traditional formations of the working class, chiefly the formations comprising the tripartite alliance.

Firstly, the ANC has moved rapidly to become the party of big capital and has wrenched itself free from the commitment to 'a better life for all' and restructured itself around a discourse of black empowerment. Secondly, and following close behind is the numerically small, but politically significant SACF, which has continued to position itself as the glue that holds the liberation alliance together by covering the ANC's rightward convulsions in leftwing language. This leaves only Cosatu.

The widespread nature of these movements is a challenge to Cosatu to reassess its political relationship with the ANC, ...

Cosatu is the most significant of the old social movements in South Africa. For much of its history it was the principal force within the liberation movement that defeated apartheid. It is the largest working class formation in South Africa. It has a history of social movement unionism in which it acted as a champion of the poor beyond its industrial constituency. Its traditions of militancy and its socialist perspectives made it the principal leftwing opposition to the ANC's transformation into a bourgeois party. In the aftermath of the first democratic elections in 1994, it mounted significant campaigns against legislation that sought to promote labour market 'flexibilities' and against the state's programme of privatisation.

Since the adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (Gear), however, some one million jobs have been lost. Figures for total unemployment vary from 29% (once discouraged workers are excluded – Labour force survey quoted in *Business Day* 26/9/2002) to near 40%. Two important trends are emerging:

- The size of the employed working class is shrinking as a result of neoliberal policies.
- The composition of the working class is changing.

The changing nature of the labour process has seen that informalsation now extends into the formal sectors as firms outsource, sub-contract and casualise labour and the public sector downsizes. These informalised workers are largely outside the organised labour movement. To these changes must be added the greater degree of rural poverty as labour tenants get driven off land and peri-urban squatting accelerates as poor people move toward cities seeking work or as the non-delivery of housing exacerbates

township overcrowding. With the massive number of workers in debt and the cuts in social services living standards for working class South Africans have collapsed. The re-composition of the working class towards higher unemployment, increased informalisation, changing male-female ratios and a new urban-rural commuter status is not being reflected in the composition of the trade union membership.

Cosatu has always, legitimately, defended itself against accusations that it is an elite by asserting the fact that it is the organised workers who carry the burden of extra family members when there is no social security network. But this truism is not being combined in terms of strategies to build organisations or networks of the unemployed or to recruit casual and informal sector workers to the trade unions or even to change the nature of collective bargaining. Nor is it being combined with active campaigns to take up broader community issues, notwithstanding top-level Cosatu participation in issues such as the Basic Income Grant.

For many millions of workers issues of collective bargaining and the waged sector simply fall outside their experience. Moreover, even where workers are unionised there is a vast space between their experiences and wage negotiations taking place in distant forums, and, these days, about even more distant multi-year agreements.

In this regard the emergence of struggles around landlessness, evictions and electricity and water cut-offs could be a source of the revival of residential structures such as the Cosatu locals or the resurgence of participation of workers in trade union structures. The emergence of these community-based struggles is also an

opportunity for the labour movement to experiment with forms of organisation that are more conducive to organising the unemployed and retrenched workers or casual workers and workers in the informal sector. Their 'site of struggle' is not so much the regular workplace, but somewhere between the workplace and the township. If the unions were to take up these issues in joint local forums with the emerging social movements there would be important opportunities for organising membership and for experimenting with new forms of collective bargaining.

The significance of the Alex march

The rise of new social movements in South Africa – from the LPM, to those grouped under the APF, to the Western Cape Anti-Evictions Campaign (AEC) – is an index that a new political alignment of forces is developing. The widespread nature of these movements is a challenge to Cosatu to reassess its political relationship with the ANC, on the one hand. On the other hand, the movements represent an opportunity for Cosatu to re-appropriate its own history of social movement unionism and, in doing so, renew its past role as acting as a voice for the poor. Such an initiative would open spaces for a broader anti-Gear mass movement.

References

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Debate around the Minerals and Petroleum Resources

Development Bill (promulgated on 4 October 2002) and the draft mining charter dominated media headlines in recent months. This debate has brought to the fore some of the real tensions in South African society around race, class and access to wealth, which underpin the transformation of the South African society and economy.

In the aftermath, some critical questions remain around the extent to which the society is being or will be transformed in a real and tangible way. *Transformation is not only about the growth of a black elite or the consolidation of a black middle class, but also about ensuring that a non-racial economy leads to redress and redistribution.* In South Africa, less than 100 000 people earn more than R8 000 a month. What is the elite everyone is talking about?

The reality remains as per President Thabo Mbeki's notion of two nations – one rich and white and the other poor and black.

How can this country 'play as if it is one happy family' when this situation continues, a political observer asks. The reality is that the country has gone through an incomplete transformation. The spectre of blacks controlling the 'mining industry resulted in R67bn (this amounts to three times government's housing budget) being wiped off the value of mining shares on the JSE



Securities Exchange. This occurred following the 'leak' of a draft mining charter. So where does this leave real transformation?

History of BEE

Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) emerged in the post-1994 period as one of the key measures to ensure the inclusion of black people into the mainstream economy. The concept – now the subject of much debate as to what it means – did not just emerge in post-apartheid South Africa.

The idea of black people having access to the economy formed part of the thinking of the Freedom Charter,

which states that: 'all the people shall share in the country's wealth'. Jeremy Cronin and Raymond Suttner explain in their book entitled *30 years of the Freedom Charter* that the clause on 'the wealth shall be restored', pinpoints to an injustice in the production and distribution of the country's wealth and offers to redress the situation.

More intense discussion around national empowerment and access to the economy within the ANC emerged in the 1980s together with affirmative action. At the time, affirmative action was the key focus while BEE issues was an approach emphasised, some would argue, by the so-called Africanist