

South Africa and Britain

some parallels for trade unions

Despite the obvious political differences between the situation in Britain and South Africa, there are some parallels.

In Britain we have a Labour government which prides itself on being 'New Labour'. This title signifies its going over to a neo-liberal programme and abandoning its old social democratic programme of the welfare state. Blair preaches globalisation, flexibility and 'social partnership'. He has consciously sought to build a base of support amongst big business leaders, saying that he wanted New Labour to become 'the party of business'. Before the general election he proudly boasted to an audience of businesspeople that even after his proposed employment law changes, Britain would still have the most restrictive employment laws in Europe.

In South Africa, the ANC government has also adopted a neo-liberal approach - GEAR. Despite all the rhetoric, it has abandoned the RDP. It is following a policy of privatisation that can only have the same results as it did in Britain: job cuts and a worsening of the service provided. Whilst nobody would have imagined that any government could have overcome the many legacies of apartheid overnight, its overall policy is making the situation worse for the victims of apartheid. I agree with Dinga Sikwebu (*SA Labour Bulletin*, vol 23 no 4) that the chances of the

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promised 'accelerated change and speeding the delivery of basic needs will be remote if not nil'. Likewise, Oupa Lehulere (*SA Labour Bulletin*, vol 23 no 4) is right when he speaks of the redistribution from the poor to the rich lying at the heart of neo-liberalism.

'Empowerment' of black people through the creation of black businesses does not 'empower blacks' (as an oppressed group). It merely enriches a few black people. Any amount of radical rhetoric cannot hide the fact that such people have abandoned the struggle for socialism.

It is difficult to see how COSATU can support a government whose entire policy is based on neo-liberalism. Having been silent on GEAR in the pre-election period, the government swiftly made it clear that there would be no 'post-GEAR' situation and that the privatisation process would be speeded up.

Social partnership

In Britain many unions support 'social partnership'. This identifies the interests of workers and employers as achieving 'success' in the global market. For capitalists, of course, success is measured in profit and dividends, not social provision. The cost of this approach has been unions accepting job

losses. There has been a massive social cost for the working class as a whole - in particular the number of jobs for the younger generation has shrunk considerably. This has also led to a 'generational crisis' in the unions, leading to a shortage of young activists.

In South Africa, the equivalent approach has been based on the German model of 'social partnership', co-determination etc. The *Bulletin* has had articles explaining how this model has to 'balance' the interests of government, employers and employees. This balance is an illusion. This approach accepts the aim of 'success' for South African capital in the global market. Just as in Britain, this 'success' is at the cost of the working class, in this case largely black workers given the remnants of the massive wage differentials of apartheid.

Despite their differences both these approaches, in Britain and South Africa, tie the working class to 'their own' employers. In reality workers have more in common with 'foreign' workers than they do with 'their own' bosses. However, 'social partnership' sets workers in competition with workers overseas. It transforms our real friends into enemies, and our enemies into friends!

In my own union, the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT), there is a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the government of a party which trade unions have long supported. Not only has the government refused to re-nationalise any part of the privatised rail network, but it is now proposing to privatise the infrastructure of the London Underground. Even those Members of Parliament we have financially sponsored have failed to openly oppose this privatisation. RMT members are therefore asking why should we give money to people who do not support us. Questions are likewise being asked in relation to the ANC.

Independence

The key issue for unions in both countries is their independence from capital. Class independence does not rule out compromise since compromise is largely a question of the balance of forces. However, it does mean recognition that capitalism exploits workers for its own success.

Despite the differences, both the Blair and the ANC governments are striving for a 'success' that can only be obtained at the expense of the working class and oppressed.

Trade unions as organisations of self-defence, open to all workers, irrespective of their political outlook, cannot be sufficient vehicles for struggling for socialism. That requires political organisations. However, unions can play a crucial role in the struggle against capitalism to the degree that they defend the independent interests of the working class and oppressed sections of society. This requires a break from 'social partnership' in its various forms.

In Britain a number of union activists opposed to the 'social partnership' agenda, are launching a new trade union publication, *Solidarity*, which will work for a break of our unions from this agenda. Central to striving for such a break with this approach is recognition of the need for an internationalist outlook that recognises the common interests shared by workers around the world. We will carry material that draws on the international experience of the working class, including that in South Africa. We are keen to learn from your struggles, whilst you surely can learn from our rich and painful experience. ★

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