

# South African Communist Party

## A history leading to tough questions

The South African Communist Party has struggled to adapt to South Africa's new democracy, with recurrent crises in its relationship with the ANC. **Roger Southall** argues that central to its difficulties has been the liberation movement's theory of National Democratic Revolution (NDR).

**D**espite its historically problematic relationship with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the failure to lay Stalin's ghost, it is difficult not to admire the South African Communist Party (SACP).

It was the first political movement in South Africa officially to practise non-racialism. It restructured itself as an underground movement in enormously difficult circumstances after being banned in 1950. It inspired numerous brave and dedicated individuals who devoted

their lives to the anti-apartheid struggle. It kept alive the notion of working class struggle in the liberation movement and it played a key role in the armed struggle and the mobilisation of the international campaign against apartheid. The SACP can justifiably claim to have played a major role in founding South Africa's democracy.

Yet democracy has caused internal divisions and crises, notably in the party's relationship with the African National Congress (ANC).

### SACP AND NDR

The national political tradition in South Africa goes back to the 1920s when black trade unions first emerged. The Communist Party of South Africa was central to organising black workers into unions. After its banning, its connection with black labour was mainly organised through the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), which began to engage with nationalism as a way of transforming its small factory base.

This nationalism found expression in the formation of the Congress Alliance, which formally linked Sactu and the SACP to the ANC. The result was the redefinition of the unions' role as primarily political, rather than economic. It was argued that the alliance facilitated union growth and enabled workers to influence the 'national democratic' struggle. However, critics have argued that 'political unionism', rather than advancing worker leadership of the struggle, led to the unions' subordination to the liberation movement.

The NDR formula expressed the liberation movement's commitment to the overthrow of 'internal colonialism' or, in other words, the domination of the majority black population by a white settler minority. This, it was said, was so extreme that it had stunted the growth of a black middle class and black capitalism. Barring a handful of homeland rulers or councillors who collaborated in oppressing their own kind, the tiny black middle class was thrust into an alliance with the working and popular classes under ANC leadership.

Internal colonialism, or 'colonialism of a special type', rather than class struggle, was thought to be the correct strategic response in the national democratic struggle. This implied a multi-class alliance under ANC leadership which drew in the oppressed black masses and sympathetic whites aiming to establish a 'national democracy'. However, there were strategic divisions over whether South Africa had to pass through a capitalist national-democratic stage en route to socialism (a two-stage revolution), or whether the struggle for national liberation and socialism were co-terminous.

The culmination of the liberation struggle saw ANC dominance within the Tripartite Alliance. In the complex national and international circumstances after 1994, this led to the dominance within the liberation movement of an interpretation of the NDR that called for the extension of popular control over the 'commanding heights of the



Delegates at the SACP Congress in July this year

economy'. When this demand was formulated by the Freedom Charter in 1956, nationalisation of the commanding heights might have been possible. But by 1994 it was not. But it was an easy step for the left to translate this demand into a call for 'demographic representivity' or the 'blackening' of the corporate sector, which big capital was happy to concede.

This led to the ANC's adoption of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) as a strategy for the rapid expansion of a black middle class and the creation of black capitalism. ANC formulations of the NDR theory do warn that, because of its dependence on the state and need to collaborate with white capital, black capitalists are likely to become a 'parasitic bureaucratic bourgeoisie'. To counter this, the theory insists that the black bourgeoisie must be kept under the discipline of 'patriotism' by subordinating itself to ANC leadership.

The ANC's dilution of the NDR into a demand for 'representivity' has, however, allowed for the upward mobility and enrichment of blacks in the corporate sector to be presented as advancing the NDR. Cosatu and the SACP have clung to more radical interpretations of the NDR, insisting on it as a stage en route to socialism. In contrast, the ANC leadership under Thabo Mbeki has increasingly insisted that the ANC has never been socialist, and that the blackening of capitalism through BEE is the revolution's end-point.

In theory, the ANC may concede that the SACP's role is to lead the working class. But its practice in the Alliance has been to demand the left's subordination to the nationalist project. Initially, the weight of the worker organisations in the Alliance led to important gains for workers within a corporatist framework. But this has been eroded, leaving organised labour increasingly politically marginalised.

In response, the SACP and Cosatu argue that the ANC is too important to leave to the bourgeoisie and should be 'recaptured' from within. Democratic struggle in the Alliance should translate into working class leadership of the ANC, with the promotion of black capitalism as a means to attaining socialism. Yet the notion of the 'patriotic bourgeoisie' has always sat uneasily with the SACP's Marxist interpretations of history. A further contradiction is that history suggests that, in practice, the SACP is also uncomfortable with worker or participatory democracy.

#### SACP AND WORKER DEMOCRACY

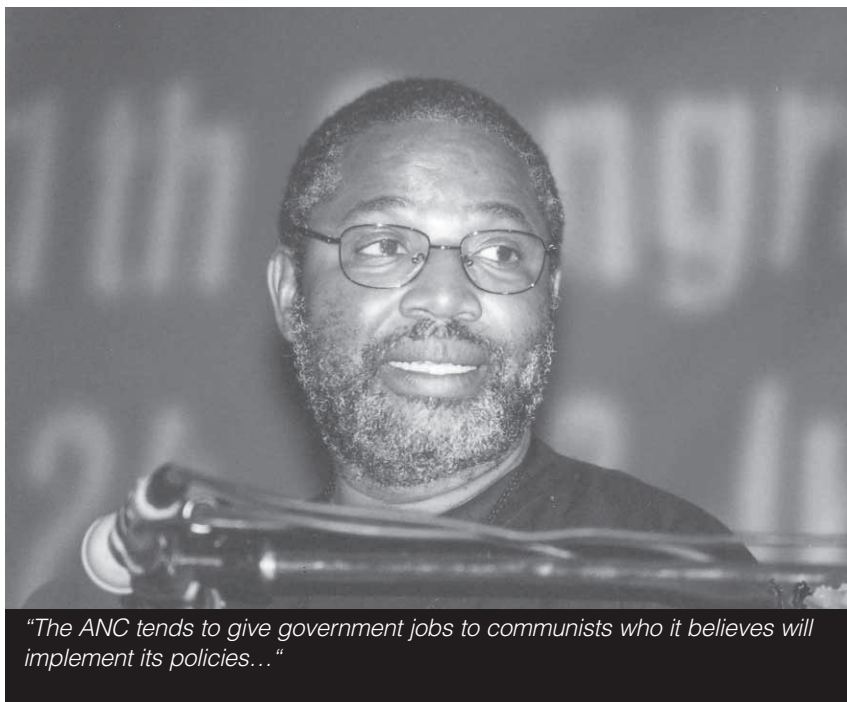
After the apartheid state banned the ANC and defeated political unionism, Sactu followed the SACP into exile. However, black unionism experienced a revival from the early 1970s. Mindful of Sactu's fate, the most effective emerging unions avoided political action outside of the workplace, and took a cautious line on involvement in broader political struggles. These unions, particularly affiliates of the

Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) (formed in 1979), emphasised the building of democratic shop-floor structures on the principle of worker control, accountability and the mandating of worker representatives. They saw this as the basis for developing a working-class leadership in the factories. Some even supported the creation of a mass-based working class party as an alternative to the SACP, which they saw as Stalinist.

The self-organisation of black workers threatened the leadership claims of Sactu and the SACP. In virulent attacks on the shop-floor tradition, they argued that its attempts to organise unions under a 'fascist' regime would lead to reformism, and maybe collaboration with the apartheid regime.

Fosatu, claimed Sactu's historians in 1981, had joined a list of unions which had historically failed to represent the interests of the black working class. "Our accumulated experience," argued the *African Communist*, "tells us that the trade unions alone, the workers' struggle alone, will not in itself pass beyond the limits of economic struggle against the employers. To pass beyond that limit, there is need for a clear socialist theory, which understands the nature and the course of development of capitalist society, and which can thus point the way in which socialism can be reached."

The SACP threw its ideological weight behind the so-called 'community' unions which followed the Sactu tradition. However, the major victories of the shop-floor unions, the ANC's growing regard for Fosatu, and Fosatu's central role in the struggle for labour unity, led Sactu and the SACP to greater acceptance. This culminated in the 'strategic compromise' of 1985 when, with Cosatu's formation, the



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shop-floor and political union traditions joined forces.

The sometimes bitter divisions between 'workerists' and 'Charterists' was buried, largely in response to the regime's attacks on the townships. The SACP's central role in developing black unionism, broken by the shop-floor tradition, was now restored. But this remained a tenuous re-connection until the 1990s when the links of the mid-1980s were consolidated and the union movement was once more subordinated to the political leadership of the ANC. By this time the SACP had to respond to the dilemmas posed by national democracy, which had assumed a liberal-democratic form.

### SACP: NATIONAL AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

In 1994, the ANC's hegemony in the Tripartite Alliance was confirmed by the decision that SACP members would stand for election as ANC candidates, and that, to serve worker interests, Cosatu would deploy leaders to parliament under the ANC banner.

Successive Cosatu worker surveys showed workers' overwhelming loyalty to the ANC and minimal support for the notion that the SACP should run its own candidates. Yet the surveys also indicated weakening worker

support for the ANC, and a quiet groundswell in favour of an independent working class party of the left - though this remains a minority position.

At the same time, SACP activists claim that the response to its grass-roots campaigns indicate considerable support for it among the unemployed. This could be read as people supporting the party's renewed claim to leadership of a more autonomous working class and its pursuit of a radical NDR. This finds current expression in the strategy of capturing the ANC from within, and the debate about the SACP going it alone electorally.

But the SACP is entangled in the ambiguities of the NDR, and does not know how to escape them. Nearly every SACP member is a member of the ANC. Historically, dual membership posed no serious problems. The left needed a broad coalition for political liberation. The ANC would create a democratic South Africa, during which phase the SACP would serve as a vanguard leading the country to socialism. However, after 1994, the SACP abandoned the two-stage theory in favour of the idea that the struggle for socialism should take place simultaneously with the pursuit of the NDR.

The SACP has three possible responses to the current electoral

and democratic framework.

First, through dual membership, it can seek to influence the ANC from within. This strategy was adopted in 1994 by the SACP and remains the dominant position favoured by the leadership.

However, in practice, it means that the SACP has been subordinate to the ANC. It does not act as an organised caucus in the ruling party. Also, many senior SACP members have gone into government office where they tend to act as ANC members and further ANC policies, even when such policies conflict with policies of the SACP. The most notorious example of this was the support of SACP members for the Gear (Growth, Employment, Redistribution) strategy.

The ANC tends to give government jobs to communists who it believes will implement its policies, and they tend to become the government's most enthusiastic supporters. In parliament, some try to influence ANC policies in accordance with SACP goals. Other party leaders however hope that after another election, they themselves will become ANC office-holders.

The resulting tensions can be acute. SACP members who criticise the ANC's policies or broad direction have been accused of being counter-revolutionary and slapped back into line. The most dramatic instance was the denunciation of senior communist Jeremy Cronin by ANC Dumisani Makhaye in 2001, after Cronin suggested that the ANC was becoming 'Zanufied'.

The second possible strategy is for the SACP to put up its own list of candidates at a general election separately from the ANC, but to work in coalition with it. The SACP could then act more autonomously

in the Alliance, and provide a more independent voice. The assumption, despite most evidence to the contrary, is that the SACP would gain a credible parliamentary presence. But this would not solve the problem of dual loyalties. SACP members appointed to office would still be bound by collective responsibility, remaining primarily accountable to the ruling party. And unless the ANC lost its overwhelming parliamentary majority and become dependent on SACP support, which is unlikely, the SACP would become little more than lobby-fodder.

The third option, of complete independence, is strongly associated with elements in the Gauteng region. Yet a motion at the 2004 Gauteng congress favouring SACP independence as a way of entrenching 'revolutionary parliamentarism' and promoting working-class rights was defeated. The counter arguments are that the SACP would be reduced to a rump and right wing elements in parliament such as the Democratic Alliance and in the ANC, would be strengthened.

The notion of taking control of the ANC from within has translated into the dubious strategy of backing Jacob Zuma's bid for ANC and state presidency. Zuma, who strongly supported Gear when in office, is an unlikely leader of the left, whatever his personal popularity. He represents highly patriarchal, even militaristic values and appears to have cultivated support by manipulating Zulu ethnicity. He enjoys the backing of highly opportunistic elements in the ANC.

**SACP, THE LEFT AND THE FUTURE**  
Parliamentary and extra-parliamentary organisations capable of critiquing the government's



*Jeremy Cronin was denounced when he suggested the ANC was becoming "Zanufied".*

market-driven policies and mobilising popular support are vitally important. But there is little evidence that the SACP can fulfil this role. It has formulated some valuable alternative positions on paper, undertaken some important campaigns, and has sharply criticised certain government policies, for example on HIV/AIDS. In some cases, it has played a progressive role in provincial and local government. Ultimately, however, it appears so constrained by its subordinate position in the Alliance, divided loyalties, and discomfort with internal independence of thought that even some SACP loyalists fear it has reached a cul-de-sac.

Should it break away from the Alliance or join Cosatu and form an independent socialist party, while still forging partnerships with social movements?

This standard suggestion requires extensive debate. There are no easy answers, and it does not help to be prescriptive, *even* about the SACP's relationship with the ANC. Most importantly, the SACP should become more accepting of internal

debate, undercutting critics who accuse it of Stalinism. It should ask itself tough questions. What platform and causes should or could a party of the left congregate? Which popular constituencies should it represent? How does it move beyond protest to the effective political mobilisation of ordinary people? How inclusive should it be? How would such a project achieve sustainable unity?

A potential obstacle is the SACP's insistence on the right to lead but this is something that must be earned. The starting point must be a willingness to confront more honestly the ambiguities of the national-democratic tradition and what it means by 'socialism' in a capitalist-dominated world. It must recognise that whatever choices it makes will cause divisions in its ranks, and that it may have to dissolve itself within a wider political formation. LB

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