

South African socialists *respond*

A panel of four South African socialists respond
to the paper by Higgins



**Enoch Godongwana:
Acting General
Secretary, NUMSA**

The first point I want to make is that we seem to be talking as if only one attempt has been made to construct socialism, that is the social democratic route. This is a problem.

Other attempts were made at constructing a socialist alternative, all with various weaknesses. The Swedish model is also collapsing, for a number of reasons. We are talking in a different context today, when capital is beginning to assert its rule and there is true globalisation. For instance, what is the impact of globalisation on the social democratic model, when globalisation tends to undermine the ability of nation states to plan economic development? These questions are critical in looking at which model is appropriate.

Let's look at the successes and the failures of the various options. What is referred to as 'existing socialism' did not have the only weaknesses. Most critiques of 'existing socialism' have focused on the political bureaucracy and commandism. We seem to lack a clear analysis of how the economic systems were working.

We should not tie ourselves to a particular model. Let's investigate what has been good in most of these models and critique what has been incorrect.

The second point is that historically our socialist vision has been simply seizure of power, which is basically an insurrectionary perspective. I would prefer that particular route, but the current situation doesn't seem to be close to an insurrection. If we want a socialist alternative in the absence of an insurrection, that poses a number of challenges for us.

I use the term 'socialism', because I still believe that it is a form of society which is different from what we have, although we may not have a clear definition.

So we argue a socialist alternative, but within the constraints of saying we cannot simply storm and seize power tomorrow. Therefore we should be creative – how do we make sure that, in the process of struggling for socialism, we assert ourselves as a

“What is the impact of globalisation on the social democratic model”

class with the objective of having class rule?

In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party or social democratic theory had some legitimacy in society as a whole, whereas we are still struggling within our liberation movements to assert a clear class theory. This imposes on us the need to look at various forms of transition. We must begin, while we assert a leading role in various areas of society, to build certain alternatives within the capitalist framework which will tend to undermine the capitalist logic.

In doing that, we cannot leave out the question of the state. As a class, the amount of public ownership and control by the state for the benefit of all of us is critical. Even if we are talking about the reconstruction programme, as we are doing in COSATU, you cannot simply rely on market forces to carry it forward. You will still need some form of state intervention and the question of nationalisation becomes critical in that debate.

In summary, we should not follow one particular model. We must take what is correct from all the models and develop what is in essence a socialist alternative in our country. That socialist alternative is not a straightforward path. We have to investigate various ways of control in the meantime, within the capitalist framework, and undermine the capitalist logic. ♦



**Dave Lewis:
Co-ordinator,
Industrial Strategy
Project**

I want to try and elaborate on some of Winton's remarks from the perspective of the work I have been involved in. I will focus on the role of industrial policy in supporting a socialist position.

The industrial project is not a project about wealth distribution or redistribution. The big guns of income redistribution really belong to the sphere of fiscal policy, and to the sphere of urban reconstruction and rural reconstruction. This is where I see the real income and wealth redistribution taking place. The contribution of industrial policy is in creating an efficient and competitive manufacturing sector that allows the state to introduce income and wealth redistribution policies. The necessary complement to what we are doing is the welfare state that Winton was speaking about. Nevertheless, an essential precondition for establishing a welfare state is an effective manufacturing sector.

But our programme is redistributive in a very important sense. A successful industrial policy is one in which the very narrow parochial interests of capitalists, and especially financial capitalists and financial capitalism, are subordinated to the requirements, or the logic (a term I don't particularly like) of capital accumulation, of economic growth or, in our terms, of industrialisation. A successful industrial policy is one that manages to unleash or empower a social force or a collective of social forces, that subordinates the narrow interests of capitalists to the logic of capital, because key fractions of

capital do not necessarily have an interest in successful industrialisation or in high rates of economic growth.

I should add that this subordination of capitalists is compatible with capitalism to a very significant extent. It has happened in different ways in societies as diverse as Sweden, Germany, Japan, Korea. These are very diverse societies – with Swedish capitalism offering far greater possibilities for progressive social outcomes than say Korean capitalism – but they have in common a social force that disciplined the capitalist class.

In Korea the capitalist corporations were disciplined by the social force that was the authoritarian military state. In Sweden and Germany, the capitalist class was disciplined by a very strong state and a very strong trade union movement. In Japan, the capitalist class was disciplined by a very complex aggregation of interests that, if it didn't include the working class, included the workers to the extent that this was manifest in life-time employment and in particular relations in the labour process that are potentially more empowering of workers than other forms of labour process.

You also have, interestingly, in all those societies, even the most authoritarian and oppressive of them, unusually high levels of income equality compared to just about any other society, certainly to any other successful industrial society. And the essence of those societies is that in a variety of ways there was a social force that was able to discipline the capitalist class. They have little else in common except high rates of economic growth and high rates of income equality.

Now, how do we secure this in South Africa? There are three ways in which we try and do that in the Industrial Strategy Project. The one is through our support for and elaboration of institutions like the National Economic Forum. The Industrial Strategy Project is very heavily committed to such forums.

The second way is through industrial relations and work organisation policies. Most particularly, we elaborate forms of work organisation very different to those that have characterised South African industrial capitalism up to now.

And the third way is through proposals for new forms of ownership in South Africa. Ownership has always occupied a very critical place in the notion of what socialism is. All of us, to varying degrees, have felt disempowered by having that carpet seemingly pulled out from under our feet very quickly.

Ownership in industrial policy is important in two senses. The one is the question of state ownership. In particular instances, state ownership is important and has to be fought for, particularly state ownership of the major utilities — the Eskoms, the Telkoms and the transport services of this country. State ownership is important because those institutions are major instruments of redistribution, in our

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electrification campaigns and all the other campaigns for the extension of these services and these commodities across the social board.

They are also very very important instruments of industrial policy and the state has to have a handle on at least those instruments if it wants to implement an effective industrial policy. In fact, South African industrial policy on mineral beneficiation is actually contingent upon Eskom being owned by the state. So state ownership is very important.

I don’t think that state ownership over the manufacturing sector is desirable. But it is necessary to question very fundamentally the way in which the manufacturing sector is owned. There is widespread recognition at the moment, even amongst manufacturing capitalists, that the forms of ownership in South Africa are particularly ineffective and are responsible for the enormous weaknesses that characterise the South African manufacturing sector. The form of ownership in South Africa is the dominance by very narrowly based financial interests of the whole of the economy, including the manufacturing sector.

The domination, in ownership terms, of productive assets by a single stakeholder is extremely undesirable. If workers alone controlled the manufacturing sector, they would tend to reinvest, for perfectly good reasons, too little of the surplus in developing the corporation in the long term. If managers alone owned the manufacturing sector, they would tend to pay themselves wages that are too high and they would tend to go for growth at the expense of financial discipline. Where

COMMENT FROM THE FLOOR

Bernie Fanaroff – NUMSA:

I was interested by what Winton had to say about the lack of efficiency of enterprises under capital. I am not entirely convinced that you cannot have efficient production which is not privately owned. Companies like Denel, or Eskom, for instance, are divorced from state departments. They are really stand-alone corporations, although in their mechanism of control they should be responsive to national goals and ideals. It is not at all obvious to me that with that kind of share-owner control you cannot have commercially successful enterprises and efficient production.

But of course it goes further, and I would be very interested to have the question of the efficiency of investment investigated. Because there is the view that it is only private investors who can invest because they are the only ones whose money is on the line. I don’t necessarily believe that. Certainly if we are looking at increasing socialisation of investment we should look at this whole question.

financiers run the manufacturing sector, as they do in South Africa, they run it in terms of very narrow, financial, short-term criteria that do not emphasise growth in industrialisation to a sufficient degree, and yet enable them to profiteer very significantly.

The policy on ownership that I am suggesting is one in which stakeholder control over the manufacturing sector is diversified, in which managers, as well as workers and to a much more limited extent the financial sector, have a share in control. The questions that really need to come back onto the socialist agenda in South Africa are questions like co-determination.

Who runs Old Mutual and Sanlam – the two biggest owners of manufacturing capital in South Africa – and how can that be made a more socialised form of ownership? There are fairly simple mechanisms for doing so. What about worker participation in boards of directors? What about things that used to be called employee share ownership? We all know the derisory way in which that has been extended by capital here, but I think that there is a real potential for making collective forms of employee share ownership into an effective new form of governing South African corporations.

In my view, if we don't take those kinds of issues on, our whole social project and our whole project to stimulate the development of a major new wave of industrialisation in this country will not be realised. The current owners of South African corporations do not have a strong material interest in that particular industrialisation path. ♦



Pallo Jordan: Head of the ANC DIP

I find the paper by Winton Higgins interesting in parts and quite refreshing and challenging in others, but I find it very troublesome in the main. In the *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel talks about night and day and he says when one thinks of the day, that idea, that notion, immediately generates the notion of the night. And because it does that, one then recognises and realises that night and day are a continuous process, that there isn't such a thing as night that exists in and of itself, or day that exists in and of itself. They have to exist, necessarily, in relation to one another.

But he goes on to say, although they are a continuous process, there are nonetheless, within that continuous process, decisive moments. And, even if we think of night and day as a continuous process, we do recognise that there is such a thing as midday and midnight, there is dawn, there is sunset. There is, of course, also twilight, which is something in between.

Now the classic social democratic thesis was that socialist strategy should consist in striving for a number of incremental changes within the context of a capitalist political economy, that these incremental changes each have an intrinsic value but

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that they are not necessarily decisively transformative of social productive relations within the economy. One thinks, for example, of the reform introduced by the British Labour Party after the Second World War. A good friend of mine likes to mention that, as a post-war baby in Britain, everyone of her generation knew that the likelihood of starving, no matter what the economic circumstances of your family, was not very great. The likelihood that you would be deprived of education or die of preventable disease because of the social circumstances of your family was not very great. Reforms introduced by the Labour Party, although they did not change the social productive relations, nonetheless had a very important impact on the quality of life of ordinary people in Britain.

The social democrats went on to argue that the cumulative impact of these small transformations was such that you would at some point reach a critical mass and that critical mass would then bring about some sort of decisive transformation of the society.

It is here that I find this paper a little bit troublesome. Higgins quotes the Swedish social democrat, Wigforss, “What socialists aim towards is a society with certain human values which find better and more complete expression than in bourgeois or capitalist society, but just what this sort of society would look like, cannot be displayed in advance for all time. We start with immediate predicaments and seek ways to overcome them. Socialism thus becomes not the name for a particular form of economic organisation but rather a summary of guidelines for social transformation, and not least of course economic reorganisation.”

This seems to suggest to me – perhaps I am being unfair – that even that moment of critical mass, will never actually arrive. We will always have the capitalist classes with us and maybe our task is just to contain their power, or, as Dave would have it, to discipline and subordinate the capitalists to some other interest, the interest of the greater society, the interest of the exploited, the working class, whatever term you might like to use.

Why it bothers me is that – much as I appreciate the need for not having a doctrinaire approach to social transformation, one that we perhaps inherit from the history of revolution and struggle – in every great epoch-making revolutionary struggle that we know of, there has always been your 14 July [in the French Revolution], 7 November [in the Russian Revolution], or whatever date you might choose; a moment, a decisive moment, and we can even visualise it because there are so many artistic representations of it: storming of the Bastille, storming of the Winter Palace. And, much as I say that one should not have that sort of doctrinaire approach towards social transformation, I think we must nonetheless hold onto the notion that there were things that were possible on 15 July that

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were not possible on 13 July; there were things that were possible on 8 November that were not possible on 6 November. So, much as we are not going to dogmatise the notion of a moment, there is nonetheless a decisive rupture and that rupture is perhaps one of possibilities rather than decisive transformation.

What faces South African socialists today is the question of how we get to that decisive transformative moment. Before I came to this meeting, I was in a meeting of my department where we were attempting to discuss a media strategy for the ANC Alliance in the forthcoming elections. One of the issues we focused on was a tension which exists, and which is sometimes not clearly recognised within the Alliance. A tension exists between the expectations and the claims of the most oppressed and exploited in our society on the one hand and, on the other, the need for the Alliance to build a broad range of political forces, which are not necessarily in the Alliance, who are for a peaceful settlement, and the need for the Alliance also to elaborate a programme that is going to result in some form of reconciliation after the electoral victory we hope to win on April 27 next year.

It is in that context also that we have to look at what Higgins says about the fetishisation of state power by socialists and particularly those socialists in the Marxist tradition. Because the big problem has always been that those who hold power, the incumbents, whether defined as a racist state or capitalist classes or any other dominant class, do not want to surrender power. And even when they have not necessarily lost power, but where they see their power decisively challenged, they fight back and they inevitably use the instruments of coercion. The state then, as one of the key instruments of coercion in society, has always been one of the terrains which the socialists saw as necessary that they should capture, even for the limited objective of merely subordinating the capitalist classes to the interests of capital and society in general.

In South Africa, how do we arrive at a point where we can subordinate the capitalist classes to the interests of a more just

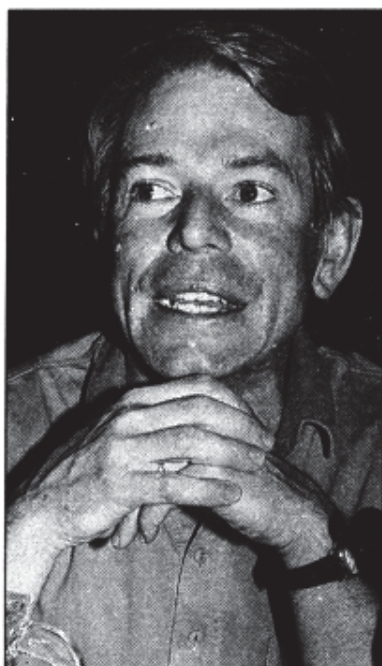
**COMMENT FROM
THE FLOOR**

Jeremy Daphne – SACCWU:

My concern is a national liberation project which envisages a socialist project occurring at some later date. That is definitely how it appears in the Alliance reconstruction programme that was presented to the COSATU Congress. In the Alliance document it clearly states this is not a socialist project we are engaged in now, it is a project for national liberation. I am giving an interpretation, and it is one which is widely expressed amongst the membership that I interact with.

society, constructing a more just society and beginning a process of reconstruction along the lines that Dave is suggesting, which implies rapid industrialisation, which is going to create full employment, and also, through that, create the possibilities of redistribution? One of the answers, one of the pat answers the movement had was, 'take the commanding heights out of the hands of the capitalist class', hence those clauses in the Freedom Charter about nationalisation. We all know, of course, that the leadership of the ANC has had occasion to revisit those clauses in the Freedom Charter. I am not certain that the reasons for revisiting it are the sorts of reservations that Dave is expressing, but that is another question.

It is perhaps in this area that I find Higgins' paper challenging and refreshing, because he does suggest a strategy, which doesn't necessarily imply grabbing hold of the state or nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy, but in a sense establishing a number of strategic bridgeheads ? which enable you to empower the working class and the oppressed, and from those bridgeheads you begin then to subordinate the capitalist classes to the interests of society in general. I think to me that was the most useful aspect of the paper. But I think my remarks should be taken with the reservations I expressed at the beginning.



**Jeremy Cronin:
Editor of *African
Communist***

Iwould first like to agree with Winton's observation that crisis also means opportunity. On the left, the crisis that has hit us in the last several years is a very important opportunity to emerge from trenches. Often, as we know, the deepest trenches have not been those between the Warsaw Pact and the Pentagon, but the trenches within the left. What I find most valuable about Winton's input is that he is compelling us to think about a particular left tradition which we in SA have all too easily dismissed as irrelevant.

Winton is talking about a particular left tradition, mainly embodied in the Swedish labour movement. He's extracting from that tradition a particular style, not just of unionism, but of politics. And this strikes many important chords for us in South Africa at present. Different people have labelled this kind of politics in different ways. John Saul, Eddie Webster and Karl von Holdt, have talked about a revolutionary reform (or structural reform) style of politics. What this points to, this notion of revolutionary reform – and let's use the words provisionally – is that, on the one hand, one has to maintain a revolutionary perspective if one's going to make socialism. To lose sight of one's perspective is to guarantee that you will never make that socialism. So, it's important to hold onto basic goals. Winton is pointing in that direction. I am not sure that he elaborates what he means by those goals sufficiently. He refers to liberty, equality, fraternity, and then invests them with a

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twentieth century and socialist content. I don’t have a problem with that, but it is still a little bit vague. It needs to be a lot more concrete.

The second important thing that Winton introduces and which also belongs under the revolutionary pole of the process is that it must be mass driven. That’s very important. It is not an issue of elites, bureaucracies, bestowing socialism upon us.

The third area is the area which is virtually absent in his paper, but which I would want to attach to the revolutionary pole of revolutionary reform, and that is the notion which Pallo has introduced, of rupture, of break. I don’t believe that the process of transformation in the direction of socialism is simply evolution. There are going to be ruptures. Now I would disagree a little with Pallo’s fascination with the all-important moment. Very often one is talking about a series of dramatic breaks, partial ruptures. I am not sure that there’s an easy moment when one says, yesterday we were in capitalism and today we are in socialism; but certainly the notion of rupture is very important.

On the other hand, one needs to engage a revolutionary politics with the present, which means a socialist strategy of engagement, not disengagement. That engagement with the present is partly what Pallo was talking about: building bridgeheads for further advances. But bridgeheads need to have their own inherent value as well. The rupture, the partial rupture, which we hope for at the end of the April next year with the elections, will be an important break. Things, if we do them right, will be different on April 28 from what they were, there will be more possibilities – a certain rupture will have occurred. But that moment will have an inherent value as well, it is not just a bridgehead for something else, it’s not just an instrumentalist thing. This is important – we’ve got to mobilise people, but also deliver, in an ongoing process of reform.

To develop a politics of this kind, one’s talking essentially about a hegemonic project, to try and make a working class, socialist project hegemonic. To have such a project, you have to enter into a critique of the two dominant socialist traditions of the 20th century. The one would be the old social democratic tradition, which amounts to fatalistic evolutionism – Bernstein’s “the movement is everything”. In this tradition, the direction of the movement becomes obscure and is eventually abandoned and forgotten. Hence the need for the revolutionary pole, of revolutionary reformism.

But, one also needs to critique the Bolshevik tradition – not absolutely, I agree with Enoch. In the first place, this means critiquing the notion of the ‘the Moment’. Related to this has been Bolshevism’s tendency to think of the socialist project, before ‘the Moment’, as an accumulation of forces outside of capitalism, in preparation for ‘the Moment’ – hence the great stress on, and the particular conceptualisation of a cadre vanguard party. Insofar as you engage with the actuality of the

capitalist system, before 'the Moment', it's to engage the working class in a pedagogic project, so that they can learn how terrible capitalism is. I think that this is a very instrumentalist and finally unhelpful way of developing a socialist project. In my view, both the social democratic and mechanically orthodox Bolshevik approaches end up with a statism, where you try to dispense socialism from above, whether its form the political bureau or a parliamentary party. All of this is, I believe, in line with Winton's position.

There are weaknesses in Winton's paper. In the first place, he has not strengthened his argument sufficiently against misinterpretations from Dave. Dave says the test of a successful industrial policy is that it should be competitive. I would put a question mark next to that. A successful industrial policy has perhaps to be competitive, but that isn't the bottom line test. The bottom line test is that it's got to deliver. It's got to clothe people, feed people, house people. You might find that, in order to do that, you've got to be competitive.

But I would begin with the material needs of people. To start with "we've got to be competitive" is to fall into the trap which I think Dave is in very self-consciously. He says that we must submit the capitalist class to the logic of capital. Why? I think we must submit the capitalist class to the logic of social need, of social demand, to the logic of a working class political economy. So Dave remains very self-consciously, within the logic of capital. As socialists, we are trying to challenge that logic. I think that this is also Winton's position and I would be interested to hear if he is comfortable with Dave's endorsement of his position. It is an endorsement based, I think, on the fact that Winton's own position is not always sufficiently buttressed against a simple reformist interpretation.

I think that there's another very very serious silence in Comrade Winton's paper. It is a traditional, silence of social democracy, and not of Bolshevism. In his paper Winton says, "Socialism is the sole legitimate heir of the eighteenth century radical democratic thought that erupted in the French revolution under the battle cry 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'". In fact, the socialist tradition has been the form that the older, broader democratic revolution has taken for over a century of Western politics." Those last two words signal the lacuna, the silence. Social democracy, particularly in its first decades, was peculiarly blind about the colonial world, the third world, national oppression. This is why social democracy doesn't exist in name in South Africa – because it's been historically irrelevant to the dominant issue in our society, of national oppression, of racial oppression.

I would argue that socialism is not the sole legitimate heir to the radical democratic traditions of the eighteenth century. In the twentieth century, the national liberation movement in the South is another very legitimate heir to those radical democratic

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traditions. Take the Freedom Charter. Or take OR Tambo, if one wants to personalise it. He is a fine twentieth century representative of radical democracy. He might not have been a socialist, but his national liberation brand of radical democracy has a great deal of relevance and resonance within South Africa, within the South, within the third world.

Perhaps other legitimate heirs to the eighteenth century radical democratic traditions are the new social movements that have emerged since the late 1960s, whether the Greens or Feminism and so forth, those various human rights movements are also very much in the tradition of radical democracy. I think one of the prime reasons why social democracy was blind to the greater part of humanity was its evolutionism. Social democracy believed history advances from its most advanced side, so socialist revolution/evolution will occur where the working class trade union organisations are most developed, where capitalism is at its strongest and so forth. And so struggles in China or even Russia were backward at best and ignored by the dominant tradition within the Second International.

Bolshevism, by contrast, which was both the theory and practice of making a socialist revolution in the most backward European society, had a theory of the weak link, if you want to follow Lenin, or of combined and uneven development according to Trotsky. It had a much more dialectical understanding of the global situation and, therefore, of differential possibilities for socialist advance. This is why Bolshevism has had such a resonance inside South Africa, and why social democracy, in so far as it exists, hardly dares speak its name in our country.

I am saying all of this because I agree with Winton that we need, as socialists, to develop a hegemonic project. And that means engagement with the present. We've got to engage and democratise the process, to be at the forefront of the transition. Now, how do we develop socialism as a hegemonic project in a country like South Africa? This is not Australia and it's not

**COMMENT FROM
THE FLOOR**

Leonard Gentle – SACCAWU:

At the end of the day we're left with the notion that there are broad social movements which are contesting various terrains, and they hold out promises – but promises of what? That is still the question to be posed. The creative engagement of unions with management is left precisely that – creative possibilities, but creative possibilities towards what?

If the current organisation and distribution of wealth are in themselves a brake on further human development, a rupture is required, a new transformation is required. The institution for that transformation is the state. The task posed to socialists is how do we strengthen the working class in order for it to be able to take state power? However old-fashioned it may sound, that is still the task for socialists today.

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Sweden, it’s not Cuba either, or China, or Tsarist Russia.

In our situation already there is an emerging hegemonic project and that is the national liberation struggle — that’s the hegemonic project. We don’t have to fabricate a hegemonic project. The weakness of South African capital that Winton referred to earlier partly has to do with this, its isolation from the majority, its inability to be hegemonic, to appear to articulate the interests of the broad majority. Here in South Africa there is a national liberation movement, which is massive, of which COSATU is an integral part. We’ve got to insert the socialist project into that, not build it somewhere else, outside of this hegemonic project.

The hegemony of the national democratic project compels us to think wider than an organised industrial working class. It compels us to look at the majority in our society who are non-unionised, who are unskilled, seven million who are unemployed, millions who are in what is euphemistically described as the informal sector, and so forth. Therefore, to build in South Africa a hegemonic project on industrial unions alone, which again is suggested by the Swedish model that Winton argued, carries the danger that one fails to articulate those interests, and favours a privileged, albeit extremely oppressed, sector of the working masses in the country.

This project, the national liberation project, and therefore its leading formation, the ANC, are sites of struggle. We say that against the background of three failed projects, or projects which at present are in crisis.

There is the social democratic project, which has many things to recommend it, but, as Winton was saying, it’s petered out for the moment into a kind of social liberalism at best. This is a potential danger that confronts us.

The tradition of a harsh, authoritarian, centralising Bolshevik project has in the main collapsed. But so, too, has the national democratic project. It’s run out of considerable steam throughout Africa and many other parts, where it’s become bureaucratised. A once-heroic national liberation movement becomes a layer of venal bureaucrats. In my view, that’s the main danger confronting us in South Africa.

How do we guard against it? We’ve got to develop all the things that we’ve said today. We’ve got to develop a revolutionary reform strategy. The trade unions are an essential component of engagement, of buttressing a left project in our country, but it cannot just be a trade union project. Above all, in my view, we must hold to the mass line.

And that’s where there are some more problems in Winton’s paper. Although he does talk at times about the importance of the mass line, I think that sometimes gets forgotten. He says that, unfortunately, parties allied to union movements have the habit of forgetting their commitments once they are in power. The solution that he offers is that we need to rely on the political