

“The ANC will rule until Jesus comes”

Some thoughts on South African politics

Recently the Board of the *South African Labour Bulletin* had a discussion about the state of politics in South Africa. It decided to share this discussion because it raised some interesting questions and reflections.

Recently there have been important changes in the economic and political situation in South Africa and these are affecting everyone. In a confused way people are realigning themselves.

MEANING OF SPLIT FROM ANC?

What drove Cope (Congress of the People) to split off from the ANC (African National Congress) aside from personal disgruntlement? What class interests does Cope represent?

Possibly certain ANC leaders were driven to form a new party by a fear of a Zuma presidency rather than because of Cope's claims that the ANC has compromised on its democratic principles. Zuma's pro-poor stance threatens financial stability for rich capitalists which Cope seeks to represent. Its backers like Wendy Luhabe, a member of the monied bourgeoisie, reflect this. The prospect of a Zuma presidency is rattling capital. The class divide however is complicated as many wealthy capitalists also remain in the ANC.

It is interesting to note that the split in the ANC came from the right not the left as class interests have come to the fore.

The formation of a party which is friendly to big capital takes on an

urgency in the current global financial crisis where the West is investigating financial alternatives including Keynesian ideas involving greater state intervention. South Africa is also being affected by the crisis. Railway volumes have decreased, steel and other commodity prices have dropped, the auto industry is taking strain, while borrowing for capital will become more expensive as institutions show a reluctance or inability to lend. Loans are likely to come with prejudicial conditions compared to a year ago.

Class interests in the ANC have always been complex so it is not surprising that the party has fractured. The ANC's politics of inclusivity had imploded and a winner-takes-all approach had come to the fore. In this competition powerful people were pushed to the fringes and they are now seeking other political avenues. Since its Polokwane conference in 2007, the ANC has been cleaning up the legacy of the Mbeki bloc.

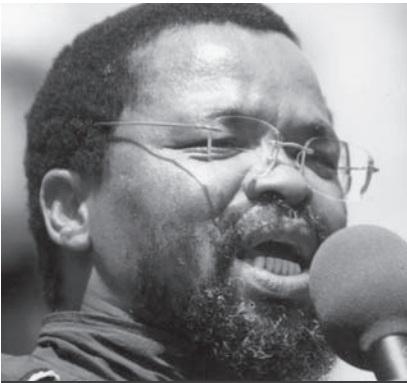
Ironically the ANC's style of exclusion has resulted in a reaction which reproduces the same exclusion. Its reaction to the formation of Cope reflects the closing down of debate that has been developing over the last few

years. Significantly Idasa (Institute for Democracy in South Africa) which regularly conducts a survey across southern Africa for the first time recorded that a fairly high percentage (27%) of respondents would not reveal their political affiliation.

WHERE DOES WORKING CLASS STAND?

At a February meeting at the University of Johannesburg speaker Sakhela Buhlungu indicated that a survey showed a drop in worker support for the ANC and an increase in support for the SACP. In the Western Cape there are also indications that young coloured support for the ANC is on the decrease whilst African youth strongly support it. This has raised fears that the former emphasis on building non-racialism is receding.

Is it likely that a new independent, non-political labour federation could take root? Former Cosatu president Willie Madisha, a Cope supporter, announced the possibility of a new federation which does not attest to its independence. A new federation is not likely to constitute a threat to Cosatu as building a strong trade union movement takes time and energy.



Gwede Mantashe and President Motlanthe come from strong trade union backgrounds

It is also unlikely that a new labour federation would violently force its way into Cosatu workplaces in the way that Inkatha's Uwusa (United Workers Union of South Africa) attempted in the 1980s and early 1990s. Uwusa's creation by Inkatha with its strong support in KwaZulu-Natal and its militaristic profile, as well as the historical context, make a repeat of this tactic, doubtful.

Cope has a measure of support from the middle class but it also has some working class support. This is particularly so in the Western Cape as well as reports of blocs of supporters joining Cope on Gauteng's East Rand. It is likely to garner support from groups of supporters who have a personal connection with its leadership.

For example in Gadi-khaadile about 800 people moved to Cope en masse because they know and trust its leadership in the area. People are seeking a voice and hoping for resources to be allocated to them. This applies equally to informal settlements on the East Rand. Ordinary people are feeling powerless and disconnected and they don't feel heard in ANC branches. Local communities showing an allegiance to known leaders is a general phenomenon worldwide where poverty and exclusion exists.

For the more informed and educated the Cope manifesto is severely lacking. What is it proposing that is so different from the ANC? It claims a focus on

implementation but gives no detail on how this will be done. When Cope leader, Mabhazima Shilowa, was Gauteng ANC premier, his provincial government's record of delivery showed important weaknesses. Corruption also was no better in Gauteng than anywhere else in the country. Cope is struggling with an identity which differentiates it from the ANC; it still needs to define its policies.

WORKER INFLUENCE IN GOVERNMENT

What are Cosatu's demands to the ANC in the context of an election platform? How is it attempting to shape the ANC manifesto? How can the union movement influence government and hold it to account? What happened to the 2006 Cosatu Congress resolution on an Alliance Pact?

There are few trade unionists on the ANC list. How much can we trust the new ANC National Executive Committee to represent labour? Gwede Mantashe and President Kgalema Motlanthe come from strong trade union backgrounds but they are bound by their positions. They are locked into an ANC and government perspective and have little room to articulate a labour agenda.

More broadly than labour, who can speak forcefully for the left in the ANC? There appears to be no left platform. There is hope of change in the ANC but who is speaking out for the youth, women and other vulnerable groups?

The labour movement represents more than just labour. It speaks for working class interests. What can the working class expect? Will labour operate as an independent force outside of the ANC alliance? Cosatu general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi and other senior unionists' have declined nomination despite appearing on the ANC list. This is important for Cosatu holding to its position on jobs and poverty. Even if Vavi was given a senior ministerial position he would hold less weight than where he stands in Cosatu now.

Is the ANC opening up, and talking with a more inclusive voice? There is a new energy in discussions and more openness and confidence to debate and express working class issues in shop stewards councils across affiliates and in Cosatu. To what extent will ANC structures respond to this renewed energy and hope? What about Trevor Manuel appearing high on the ANC list? Will the ANC follow this kind of nomination?

A new optimism is also evident in ANC branches. People feel that the ANC is back with them. Members are coming out in defence of the ANC and its Polokwane agenda. As much as some disgruntled people are leaving for Cope, others are actively defending the ANC.

Cope as a rival party for the black vote is positive as it makes the ANC more responsive and less complacent. Maybe it will listen to Cosatu more.

Nevertheless, the worry exists that

William Matlala



Zwelinzima Vavi has more power as Cosatu GS than if he was in government



Willie Madisha announced the formation of a new labour federation



Cope has the backing of some rich capitalists such as Wendy Luhabe

Cosatu is again focusing on ANC and politics and not sufficiently on union issues and the workplace. Some organisers are reluctant to do intensive organising in the workplace. Working at shopfloor level is seen as a demotion; they prefer to be in national structures. This perspective is not uniform however. Some unionists have a real concern with shopfloor issues.

It will be a rough ride over the coming year. There will be a need to defend jobs. What is Cosatu's concrete programme? It needs to develop a manifesto for the working class which will be a force in the elections. At present its demands are too general. It needs to be specific in the way US unions are seizing on Obama's election to push for legal reforms. A pact based on Cosatu demands should have preceded an ANC manifesto. Cosatu is still opening doors but not walking through them although it is heartening to see that its demand to abolish labour brokers is reflected in the ANC manifesto.

Do we believe Finance Minister Trevor Manuel that the global economic recession will minimally affect South Africa? (see p41). SACP's Jeremy Cronin has argued that before the recession government stated that it was unable to resist the global neo-liberal project but now after the crisis it is arguing (unlike governments elsewhere) that the economy is too fragile to make big changes. Why can't we try something new? The space for experimentation exists.

Why does government not view 35% unemployment as an emergency? In the US and UK 6% unemployment is seen as a crisis warranting urgent state intervention. South Africa is too bogged down in politics to address the economic crisis seriously and creatively. The ANC's Polokwane conference put the economy seriously on the agenda. Will the new government act on this?

Labour needs to urgently plan and consolidate. Manuel did not plan in the last boom period for a recession. Surely business and government know that capitalism is subject to cyclical collapses? Cosatu needs to proffer concrete alternatives to business and government.

POLITICAL TOLERANCE

Some unionists are framing Cope's politics as reactionary and advocating that Cope members should be expelled from unions. (Leadership has been firm however that unions are a home for workers of many different political persuasions.)

The current political context raises the question of political tolerance, coercion and use of violence. There is danger in the rhetoric coming from ANC members where Cope is painted as counter revolutionary, an agent of the CIA and so on. The ANC has not been genuinely challenged since coming to power but now Cope is competing for the same vote. There must be an acknowledgment in this context that democracy means the right to speak

and vote. ANC president Zuma's assertion that, "The ANC will rule until Jesus comes", meaning that it is the ANC's right and obligation to rule, needs to be challenged.

Intolerance and violence is also present in union debates and struggles. Labour needs to formulate reconciling ideas and strategies as disgruntled people can cause splits in this camp. Violence is embedded in the fabric of our society and unions are no exception. It will be a great test of our democracy if we emerge from this election with minimal violence.

Expanding the range of democratic choice is frightening. It worries us because of the possibility of violence. But the argument that there is a threat of violence can also become the big stick to ward off change. "Don't rock the boat" Cosatu was told when it wanted some independence in the ANC/SACP Alliance, "you will trigger violence." We need to move beyond such political coercion. LB

If you would like to add your ideas to these questions and comments, please send them to salbeditor@icon.co.za or write to SALB Editor, PO Box 3851, Johannesburg, 2000

The South African Labour Bulletin members who participated in this discussion were Eddie Majadibodu, Khosi Xaba, Sheri Hamilton, Jane Barrett, Anton Roskam, Karl von Holdt, Chris Bonner and Kally Forrest.