

# The SACP

## *influence or independence?*

**W**hen the SACP was relaunched as a 'mass organisation' in the early 1990s, the party was at a crossroads. It either had to disown its discredited 'Stalinist' heritage or, like most 'communist' parties around the world, collapse its identity into a reformist mould. The SACP chose to remain 'profoundly communist'.

At its 1995 congress, the party began to reconceptualise its strategic orientation. It characterised the period beyond the 1994 electoral breakthrough as a phase of "deepening and consolidating the National Democratic Revolution". A process of far-reaching political and economic democratisation and an institutional framework to encourage and consolidate this development was seen as a critical part of a socialist strategy. The SACP, in its own words, was "pivotal" in this endeavour.

### **10<sup>th</sup> congress**

At its 10<sup>th</sup> congress in June the party noted a series of "strategic setbacks and programmatic retreats" since 1994. Chief amongst these is the "pro-capitalist economic framework" (GEAR) now occupying centre stage. Delegates concluded that the RDP - which formed the overarching basis for an alliance platform in 1994 - has virtually disappeared.

This policy shift by the ANC-in-

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### *Malcolm Ray analyses the recent SACP congress.*

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government has generated tensions between the alliance partners. The congress noted this has sometimes spilled over into bitter acrimony, the foreclosure of open and vigorous debate and the marginalisation of the SACP (and COSATU) by the ANC.

The party's visibility has waned. Its role has become largely defensive. Of particular concern to delegates was the weakness of alliance structures on the ground, the demobilisation of the popular movement and the failure of SACP parliamentarians to fight for a working class agenda.

SACP spokesperson, Dale McKinley, says that, all in all: "The party has been half hidden under the rock of the ANC, occasionally rearing its head as a left cover for the policy shifts of the government... Ideological disarray in the alliance has seen the party paying lip service to its socialist ambitions, often parroting the policies of the ANC."

### **Dilemma**

The dilemma facing the congress was how to lead the way to a socialist future within this reformist straightjacket.

The first and second days of the congress set the tone for what promised

to be a fiery debate on the party's future. President Nelson Mandela and Deputy President Thabo Mbeki warned delegates in no uncertain terms that government will stand firm on its economic policy.

Contrary to media speculation that this would lead to a split in the Alliance, the prospect of the SACP going it alone in the 1999 elections held no sway with delegates. Expectations that the congress would become a battleground between a left-wing caucus and the more moderate old guard in the leadership were also dampened.

### Contesting the ANC

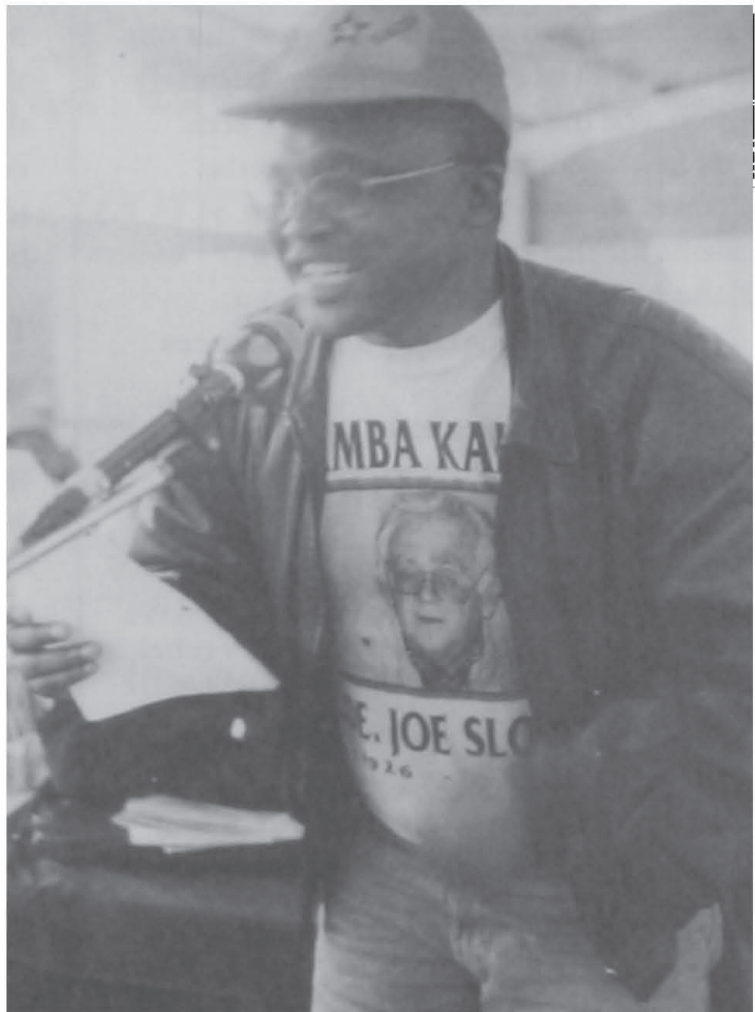
The congress adopted a strategic line which sees the party taking on a more independent profile in the years to come.

How does this square with the decision to remain in the Alliance? The answer, according to the SACP, lies in the fact that the ANC is 'contested terrain'. There is nothing new in this position. It was adopted by the party during the 1980s. Is it, however, still feasible, given the ANC's adoption of GEAR?

McKinley distinguishes between the ANC leadership's policies and the character of its constituency which "consists mainly of workers and rural poor people". Two problems can be identified with the position adopted by the congress:

- remaining in the Alliance invites a battle for political control over the policy direction of the ANC that the SACP is unlikely to win;
- if the ANC's social base is predominantly working class, where does this leave the SACP?

An alternative view held by a more critical



*A delegate addresses the congress.*

current in the SACP is that a split in the Alliance is the only guarantee against the party becoming obsolete. An independent SACP would gain support with the ANC's social base. The dominant position at the congress was, however, in the words of deputy general secretary, Jeremy Cronin, that a split would "prepare workers for permanent opposition, permanent defence, and permanent marginalisation".

### 'Holding position'

It remains a moot question whether the degree of intolerance by the ANC of criticism from the party (and COSATU) and the widespread perception that the SACP-COSATU bloc in the Alliance is a 'nuisance' to the ANC has already forced the party into an irrevocably defensive and marginal posture.

McKinley says that, while there are many reasons to split, the congress did not see a parting of the ways as a practical option. For the moment, the SACP sees itself in a 'holding position' within the Alliance. He provides the following reasons for this position:

- the party lacks the political clout, organisational capacity and resources to go it alone;
- the majority of workers and poor people are still loyal to, and identify with, the ANC;
- abandoning the ANC now might result in a destabilisation of the mass movement as sections of workers rebel and split.

"In the absence of an independent profile on the ground, a split at this point would mean the abandonment of the ANC's soul (working class constituency) to pro-capitalist forces and reactionary political parties. Our priority as a communist party is to fight for hegemony in working class-based organisations within civil society in alliance with COSATU... How the ANC responds to this is a matter which can only be settled through struggle," says McKinley.

### **Socialist programme**

The discussions on a socialist programme were an attempt to build on earlier calls to "reinvent the SACP as a relevant force in the 1990s". There was a clear realisation amongst delegates that unless the SACP challenges the hegemony of the ANC-led Alliance by making real inroads into its working class constituency, it will not gain currency in the mass movement. The congress noted that what has been lacking is an anti-capitalist programme relevant to the new political and economic environment "to enable the party to engage with the current reality on its own terms". Counterposing the RDP to GEAR was seen as inadequate.

It is in this context that a resolution to formulate an 'alternative policy framework' was adopted. It is not clear, however, what this means in concrete terms. The congress mandated the Central Committee to research alternative forms of ownership based on the notion of 'socialising capital'.

### **Transcending CST**

McKinley says that: "The congress transcended the old CST (Colonialism of a Special Type) theory and its linear descendent of 'revolution by stages'." He is hopeful that this is the beginning of a process to fill the policy vacuum.

While CST placed the conquest of state power at the centre of the party's strategy, the approach adopted by congress sees the state as a site of on-going contestation. This is a modification of the strategic path opened up at the 1995 SACP congress. The struggle for political hegemony in the state would rest on forging broad social alliances within civil society. The congress decided that the SACP should develop its own programme in alliance with COSATU and other social formations in civil society in order to fight for influence in the Alliance.

### **Prospects**

Since 1990, the SACP has made a remarkable leap of faith. It has disherited much of the ideological baggage associated with Stalinism and appears to be taking seriously the prospect of an independent status. It has a long way to go, however. While numerous ideas are being put forward, they have not been honed into a coherent programme for socialism.

The congress's greatest achievement was its resolve to develop such a programme. In the meantime, it might well be, in Cronin's words, that the 'ideological fluidity' in this period will continue to straightjacket the SACP in a holding position. ★