

The SACP: is the party over?

By DEANNE COLLINS

The South African Communist Party (SACP) held its ninth congress in Johannesburg from 6 to 8 April.

While the mood amongst the 800 delegates was buoyant, it was clear from the start that this would be a tough congress.

The theme of the congress was "advance, deepen, defend the democratic breakthrough". An unstated sub-theme, however, was the role of the SACP in the changed political situation in South Africa and its capacity to respond to these changes.

First indications of the problems facing the party came with delegates' refusal to adopt general secretary, Charles Nqakula's report as it stood. Regions insisted that the report must be fully discussed.

This move indicated dissatisfaction on the ground with the performance of top leadership. More importantly, however, it provided the opportunity for delegates to raise key issues confronting the SACP. Discussion was kept short by time constraints. Nevertheless, crucial questions emerged which go to the heart of the party's dilemma:

The role of the SACP in the Tripartite Alliance

Delegates complained that the report provided no real analysis of the relationship between the alliance partners and little clarity as to the role of the SACP in the alliance. A delegate from Gauteng suggested that the alliance represents a "false harmony" between the partners and that "bourgeois forces" within the alliance are winning the day.

President Mandela's opening address to the congress also concentrated on this issue. Defending the alliance against detractors, he

said that its basis is the "warm sentiment of common experience in the struggle against apartheid". He made it clear that the goals of the ANC and SACP do not necessarily always converge, but maintained that "there is more that unites us than divides us".

Mandela described the relationship between the ANC and SACP as one of "critical engagement". It is clear that the SACP has not yet come to terms with precisely what "critical engagement" entails.

How does the party assert its independence within the alliance, both inside and outside of government?

Critical concerns raised by delegates included the failure of the SACP to effectively oppose policies currently being pursued by the Government of National Unity which threaten working class interests. Privatisation was mentioned time and time again as an example of this process.

Major reasons put forward for this failure include the absence of a coherent party "line" on major policy issues, as well as the fact that SACP members serving in government structures are operating as individuals and not as party members.

On the second point the SACP faces the same dilemma as COSATU, whose candidates in national and provincial parliaments were elected and operate on an ANC ticket. Elements within both COSATU and the SACP have long argued for separate caucuses for "their" parliamentarians, but this has so far been rejected as "divisive". Delegates to the congress argued strongly for some arrangement which will provide direction and bind SACP members serving in government to SACP policy. Bitter accusations were levelled from the floor against promi-



Alec Erwin and Ronnie Kasrils: will they toe the party line?

nent SACP members who now, as one delegate put it "sing the same song as the bourgeois in parliament". Cabinet minister Ronnie Kasrils and deputy minister Alec Erwin, in particular, took a roasting for their support, respectively, for militarisation and privatisation.

In the end, the congress did not resolve these issues. A resolution adopted on "party building", which states that all members should accept the programme and policy of the SACP could presumably be used to pull recalcitrant MPs and others into line. The issue of the "gravy train" was tackled by means of a decision to impose a levy on all members, calculated as a percentage of member's salaries. This is clearly aimed at members who now earn high salaries. The Central Committee (CC) will decide on the exact amount of the levy.

The party of the working class?

Central to the SACP's existence is its claim

to represent working class interests and to lead working class struggle. Indeed, some elements of the SACP would have it that the party has sole rights to this claim.

This was highlighted during the debate on amendments to the SACP constitution. A proposed amendment to the aims of the party read "the SACP seeks to be the leading political force of the South African working class..." A counter amendment disputed the word "seeks" claiming that the SACP is already such a force. Swift intervention from the platform saved the day, with delegates agreeing that the party will have to earn this position.

The SACP has always given clear support to the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This was underlined by a detailed plan of action adopted by the congress, which seeks to ensure that "the working class bias of the RDP process" is strengthened.

While the party counts thousands of workers amongst its membership, many of whom are prominent trade unionists, a major weakness has been its failure to formulate a detailed plan of action for relating to the trade union movement as a whole.

Visible support for workers engaged in industrial action has at times been forthcoming from SACP structures, but the party is too often silent on critical issues affecting labour. A good example is the absence of any SACP position on the draft Labour Relations Bill. Other left groupings, such as the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA), have developed coherent analyses and alternatives to the Bill and held well-attended public meetings on the issue. Only at its congress did the SACP decide to develop a campaign around the Bill. Considering that implementation of this decision still has to be debated by the CC, the Bill will be well on the road to becoming law before any action is taken.

A well-publicised feature of the congress was the election of five prominent trade unionists to the CC of the party. COSATU office bearers John Gomomo and Sam Shilowa received the second and third highest number of votes. Incoming deputy chairperson of the party, Blade Nzimande, feels that this will inject a strong working class perspective into the party.

While COSATU leaders will certainly play an important role in bringing the concerns and interests of the trade union movement to the attention of SACP leadership, it is questionable whether their presence on the CC alone is sufficient to ensure the predominance of these interests. They have clearly not been directly mandated by their constituencies to serve in these positions and as

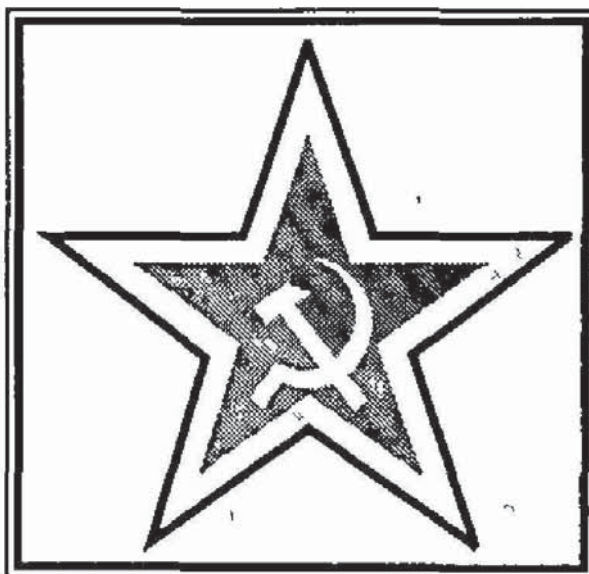
such can only operate in their individual capacities.

Organisational weaknesses

A major focus of the congress was the organisational problems facing the party.

When the SACP emerged from underground in 1990 it had just over 2 000 members. Today the party claims 75 000 members — a phenomenal increase in just five years.

The quality of membership and organisation is, however, clearly on the decline. Many members are not paying subscriptions, leaving the organisation in dire financial straits. Branches in many parts of the country are not functioning, often falling victim to the "two-hats" (or even three hats) phenomenon, with members giving priority to ANC or other work. Political education has all but ceased



and communication between head office and local structures has broken down.

Congress decided on a number of steps to address these issues, including:

- developing a core group of educators to sustain the programme of political education;
- training branch officials in administration;
- developing effective communication structures between higher and lower levels of the party;
- building cadreship through special workshops;
- developing financial self-sufficiency;
- resuscitating party media.

While the party may not yet be over, the SACP is clearly at the crossroads. Unless it grasps the opportunity and provides a clear political alternative to the current neo-liberal agenda, it may well follow the fate of other communist parties and wither into obscurity in the years to come. ☆