

# The end of 'innocence'

## *the alliance and the left*

*'The first line of defence, of those opposed to change, is ... ignore the facts.'*

*Anonymous*

There is something seriously rotten in the state of South African alliance politics. Out of the ranks of those who, for years, fought courageous and difficult battles to fundamentally change South African society, has emerged a political modus operandi whose sole function appears to be to attack and delegitimise critical dissent and practical efforts to advance revolutionary change. This transformation of yesterday's freedom fighters into today's ideological and organisational gatekeepers has left, in its wake, a 'liberation movement' increasingly dominated by 'members' who are organisationally cowed, ideologically confused and politically unprincipled. At the same time, however, this rotten state of affairs is providing opportunities for a 'new' and revitalised left resistance that has the potential to change the terrain of the South African liberation landscape.

### **Coming out the class closet**

If the warning signs have been visible for some years now, then the actions (both verbal and practical) of the alliance leadership over the past several months provide confirmation of this sorry state of affairs. There can surely be little argument that the leadership of the ANC, after years

*Dale T McKinley argues that the ANC is representing narrow class interests and that the South African left needs to transform itself to wage anti-capitalist struggle.*

of engaging in myriad political and class gymnastics, has finally come out of the class closet. The historic 'mission' of the ANC's petty bourgeois leadership, a politically stabilised and deracialised capitalism, is baring its teeth.

The macro-economic altar - Gear - upon which the ANC's societal 'line of march' has been pursued is, in reality, now firmly embedded in the realm of non-debate. In turn, this has necessitated the complete sidelining of working class forces as the class reference point for socio-economic 'transformation'. This 'role' is now occupied by an aspirant black bourgeoisie whose adherents present themselves, simultaneously, as unquestionable patriots and as the 'natural' inheritors of the liberation struggle. These 'liberators', are to be found, in equal measure, amongst the ranks of budding (private) capitalist speculators and entrepreneurs, as well as in the higher echelons of the state bureaucracy, with the political 'transit station' most often

being top leadership positions in the alliance. Coupled to these 'internal' road signs of an explicit petty bourgeois, nationalist class agenda are the 'external' demands of international capital – neo-liberalism – that have been disingenuously presented as a *fait accompli* whilst being progressively painted over with a more acceptable 'African' face.

It is partly the ANC leadership's 'success' in marketing its narrow class interests (coupled as they are to the more global, but equally narrow, interests of international capital) as those of the South African working class that has led to the present state of rotteness in the alliance. Its dedicated campaign to sell a vision of harmonious 'nation building' comprised of levelling class 'projects', has made it appear as though there have been no other political choices that could be made. And yet, as the African and internationalist revolutionary, Thomas Sankara, clearly pointed out, it is precisely the hard political choices that must be made if there is to be any meaningful 'revolution' to benefit the majority, but from which the African petty bourgeoisie always recoils: 'The revolution in Africa faces this great danger: every time, it is initiated by the petty bourgeoisie. At the beginning of the revolution the big bourgeoisie is attacked. That's easy... they are the very wealthy, the big capitalists... But after a few years it is necessary to take on the petty bourgeoisie. And when the petty bourgeoisie is attacked, we attack the very leadership of the revolution... Every revolution comes to a crossroads where it must choose: to go after the petty bourgeoisie and be able to keep the revolution radical – which causes you many difficulties; or to coddle the petty bourgeoisie – and you have no difficulties. But then you also no longer have a revolution. You have a pseudo-revolution.'

This is why we say that the petty bourgeoisie is constantly torn between two interests. It has two books. On the one hand Karl Marx's *Capital*, on the other a chequebook. It wavers: Che Guevara or Onassis? They have to choose.

### Revolution by rote

What has been more arguable is the degree to which the leaderships of the junior cousins in the alliance – the SACP and COSATU – have inculcated the political demands of the ANC's unbridled pursuit of a deracialised capitalism with all of its associated organisational 'requirements'. Having relied on the efficacy of alliance 'traditions' of talk, talk and more talk, occasionally buttressed by limited use of organised worker power, it is not surprising that these two flag bearers of the 'left' have effectively consigned themselves to the role of nuisance-makers. Whilst publicly decrying the economic flip-flops of the ANC and making constant noises about the need for more effective alliance 'consultations' and 'processes', the SACP and COSATU leadership have not been willing to make the connection between the deracialised capitalism pursued by the ANC and thus 'learn' the parallel organisational/class lessons in relation to the alliance.

The political tactics adopted by the SACP and COSATU leadership have rendered a working class-led struggle for socialism (that lies at the programmatic heart of both organisations) practically and theoretically ineffective. Those tactics have revolved around seeking to win concessions from the ANC, both in and outside the state, within a framework that has consistently watered-down economic demands being made (for example, the basis for job creation, a more radical redistribution of resources and the socialisation of basic services). At the same time, the approach to the systematic closing



*'The ANC leadership has entrenched deracialised capitalism.'*

down of working class political space within the alliance has been to rely on talk-shop alliance 'summits' that only serve to consolidate the ANC leadership's preference for elite-pacting and further demobilise and disempower base structures. The leadership of the SACP and COSATU have, unwittingly or not, been party to the now rampant and unapologetic attack on, and deligitimisation of, critical dissent and revolutionary activism. In the process, they have been gradually but effectively cutting the very ground from underneath the political and organisational feet of the working class.

The glue that has held working class forces in check, whilst ensuring their gradual but effective political marginalisation, has been the constant propagation of the need for 'unity' within the alliance. Besides stressing its 'historical' basis (without paying any attention to the existence of a more contemporary strategic commonality between alliance formations), this 'unity' is counter-posed to the dangers of an independent, socialist

workers' movement and political organisation that will break such 'unity' and thus weaken the 'liberation movement'. However, the kind of unity that the leadership of the alliance has fashioned revolves around a mass of radical-sounding rhetoric about 'transformation', 'a progressive National Democratic Reduction (NDR)', a 'developmental state', workers' interests and the 'national interest'. On paper, it looks impressive, and when repeated often enough within the organisations and publicly, sounds all the more believable.

The alliance leaderships have, much like the approach of many high school teachers to education, become professional practitioners in waging revolution by rote. Like a rabbit whose eyes are transfixed by the oncoming headlights of a fast moving vehicle, much of the alliance's constituency have become numbed by the sheer intensity of what appear to be the unshakeable 'headlights' of the 'liberation movement'.

All the while, however, the ANC leadership has proceeded apace, to further entrench (deracialised) capitalist relations of production and distribution. In the process, and with the assistance of the leadership of the SACP and COSATU, they have actively attacked any concomitant critical questioning and engagement with the substance behind such rhetoric. Not surprisingly, organised workers, and to a lesser extent others on the left, are now grappling with the resultant political and organisational confusion as to where their class interests lie. Likewise, they are desperately, if unevenly, trying to defend the space for the very critical dissent and revolutionary activism that has supposedly always underpinned the existence of the liberation struggle. My own recent experience in being expelled from the SACP is but one example of the extent to which the political and organisational rot has set in and is symbolic of what lies in store for the 'left' within the alliance.

### **'Example' of my expulsion**

After seven years as an SACP member involved in grassroots activism, holding various leadership positions in SACP, making regular intellectual contributions and spending a shorter (four-year) stint at the SACP head office, formal disciplinary charges were brought against me by the SACP central committee (CC). The charges claimed that I had brought 'the SACP into disrepute, publicly attacked and questioned the bona fides and integrity of the SACP and its leaders... publicly and consistently attacked the ANC and COSATU, and the leadership of these organisations... and publicly and consistently promoted positions that undermine the SACP'. The evidence used for these serious accusations were a series of public articles I had written in various publications, in my capacity as a freelance

journalist, in which I took a critical look at the class politics of the ANC leadership, the tactics of the COSATU leadership in opposing Gear and the content of Budget 2000.

A disciplinary hearing was hurriedly convened (designed to take place just prior to the quarterly meeting of the SACP CC), procedural rights to the representation of my choice were summarily dismissed and the SACP CC endorsed the disciplinary committee's (DC's) recommendation for my expulsion the day after the hearing. Although I was allowed to present my written response to the charges, there was no open discussion of key political issues I raised (in either the DC or the CC) and neither were copies of my response circulated to members of the two bodies. In short, it was patently obvious that the SACP leadership had already passed political and organisational judgement prior to the 'disciplinary process', that they were merely going through the procedural 'motions' as required by the SACP constitution and that the intended effect of my expulsion was to discourage and/or silence legitimate socialist debate and critique (whether as applied within the SACP or in the public domain) emanating from the lower ranks of the SACP.

If the SACP leadership is elected to represent working class interests and wage an ideological 'battle' against capitalism (in whatever form), it then becomes extremely difficult to comprehend why such charges were brought against myself (but which have implications and effects far beyond my person) for merely expressing, in the socialist tradition of robust and polemical debate, political arguments and economic perspectives that are consistent with being a revolutionary communist. This is even more so, when, at the same time, there are innumerable and incontestable examples of



*'Once vibrant party structures have been reduced to organisational shells.'*

leading SACP members who have engaged (and continue to do so) in activities and/or public interventions that are in direct contradiction to the SACP's own political programme and principles. Likewise, there are equally incontestable examples of SACP leaders that have engaged in what can only be called opportunist and liquidationist activities that have seen once vibrant Party structures reduced to organisational shells, once dynamic organic intellectuals and organisers replaced with procedural quiescence and political cliquism. Similar, if contextually different, arguments could be applied to the rest of the alliance leadership.

One of the 'weapons' used in my case to rationalise such political hypocrisy and organisational contradiction, and which has become commonplace amongst the leadership of the alliance, is the manipulation of the concept and practice of democratic centralism. Rather than embracing and affirming the right to vigorous debate, dissent and organisational control by base structures as the means to effect democratic and disciplined adherence to collectively mandated programmatic

decisions, these leaderships have abrogated unto themselves the (undemocratic) privilege of determining what is, and is not, central to implementing that programme. Even worse, they have elevated their individual perspectives to the level of programmatic 'policy', thus effectively destroying any meaningful application of democratic centralism.

### **A 'new' left resistance**

Many of the political and organisational challenges that have confronted the SACP and COSATU have stemmed directly from the ANC leadership's systematic institutionalisation of a deracialised capitalism. The fact that this has been a focal point of much debate and opposition both within and outside the alliance (as in my case), does not take away from its reality. It is precisely the associated political and economic trajectory of the ANC (both within and outside government) that has given rise to an intensified class struggle within the alliance, and in South Africa more generally. A critical and robust engagement with the political and policy choices of the

ANC and alliance leaderships, and thus with the parallel consequences for an alliance that claims leadership by, and for, the working class is essential revolutionary work.

By necessity, such work raises difficult political questions, and poses equally difficult organisational choices, centred around the character, meaning and need for the present alliance. This is but a part of a necessary, and continual, assessment and critique of the political, economic and social balance of class forces. The active discouraging and/or silencing of these essential components of any self-respecting South African left is tantamount to a political and organisational betrayal of everything for which the masses of South Africans have fought. Tactical opportunism is bad enough, but when alliance leaders begin to seriously and unapologetically argue that there is some sort of strategic necessity in containing mass militancy and suppressing critical, left dissent then it is past time to mount a dynamic and confident resistance.

All evidence confirms that the present alliance leadership is both unwilling and incapable of representing the legitimate demands of the organised working class and associated fellow travellers in an anti-capitalist socialist struggle. Rather than joining in the chorus of continual, and increasingly transparent, excuses for why the form and content of working class struggle is rapidly losing direction and power respectively, the left (both inside and outside the alliance) must come together in a common defence of the right to critical dissent and debate that is now under effective threat. From whatever ideological and/or organisational orientation, it is imperative that the South African left rises up in defence of this inalienable right.

It is no mistake that the main

watchwords of all active and dedicated revolutionaries in the contemporary period have been that if we do not learn the lessons of history, we are condemned to repeat them. The tragic consequences of the bureaucratic and politically opportunistic stifling of open and honest critique and debate within 'liberation movement' parties throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century are there for all of us to see and learn from. There are too many strategic and theoretical challenges to confront, too many working class struggles to wage and too many opportunities for mass-based, anti-capitalist mobilisation to grasp for organised revolutionaries to repeat the devastating mistakes of the past.

Simultaneously, the South African left must begin the difficult but necessary task of transforming its dissent into an open, honest and collective debate about new forms of specifically socialist, and more general anti-capitalist, struggle and political organisation. There are already beginning to emerge, in a more focused and organised way, alternative nodes of resistance that cut across most key political, social and economic issues. The time is ripe for these emergent strands to pull together in order to 'capture' a broader societal space. Working class/left dissent and debate will continue to reside at the margins as long as its focus remains predominately re-active and responsive to the tactical moves of capital and to those who have shown they have neither the objective nor subjective interests of the South African masses at heart. In revolutionary struggles there are no political forms that are sacrosanct, and the content of such struggles is in the hands of those who make them. ★

## References

*Thomas Sankara (1998) Thomas Sankara Speaks New York: Pathfinder Press.*