

The real challenges

a reply to Southall

Roger Southall's article (Fighting marginalisation: Can COSATU rely on the alliance? *Labour Bulletin*, 25 (3), June 2001) is a poor, confused and mechanical 'analysis' of the relationship between COSATU and the ruling ANC.

His analysis does not lay bare the real relationship and balance of forces in the alliance in a way that addresses the serious problems facing COSATU. It appears to take the line of least resistance by tentatively seeking refuge in the murky quarters of corporatism. It tends to obscure the real situation behind a mechanical and crude division between the 'dominant ANC' and 'corporatist' models. The truth lies obscured beneath and between these models.

Southall begins his analysis by wrongly defining a 'dominant party' as one that 'dominates society by its ability to secure repeated election victories and which can dictate the government agenda, implement policies and impose a hegemony of ideas'. The ANC's dominance – secured through the ballot box – is largely at the political-legislative level. But it is impossible to describe the ANC as dominant in the more critical areas of the economy, policy and ideology, where external forces largely dominate it.

That the ANC abandoned some of the most important demands of the Freedom Charter, such as the nationalisation of monopolies; effectively abandoned the

Ebrahim Harvey argues that COSATU will not be able to act in its own interests or that of the working class as long as it stays in the alliance.

Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP); and was compelled to adopt the neo-liberal Gear in 1996 makes it clear that it does not enjoy a hegemony of ideas, programmes or policy. Where it matters most – for the purpose of fundamental social transformation – the forces driving globalisation, mainly the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO), dominate the ANC. These virtually control governments and economies, particularly in the Third World.

The decline of the nation-state and the power of governments over the past two decades have seriously diminished the capacity for independent government action, especially in the crucial areas of the economy, finance and trade. Nothing illustrates this balance of power more starkly than the huge debt burden that diverts critical resources away from where it is most needed, into the bloated coffers of the rich countries. The more COSATU calls for an 'interventionist developmental

state', the more the ANC government has moved in the opposite direction through privatisation and other market-driven measures.

The growing socioeconomic crisis in South Africa, and government's failure to satisfy basic needs, can only generate radical opposition in the ANC and the Tripartite Alliance. This underlies the growing intolerance of internal dissent within the ANC. The suppression of dissenting views inevitably flows from the failure of its attempts to balance the competing demands of capital and labour in the midst of a crisis. The ANC is the victim of contradictions between the Freedom Charter, the RDP, constitutional rights and its electoral promises on the one hand and globalisation on the other. They are contradictions from which it cannot escape and which are likely to deepen.

The degree to which the ANC will tolerate dissent within its own ranks and the alliance is not, for the most part, determined by its commitment to democratic principles. It is a function of the need to control the tensions resulting from Gear; to prevent the policy from becoming a serious threat to the unity and stability of the alliance. The ANC is less concerned with dissent in its own ranks and the tiny South African Communist Party (SACP), over which it has a fair degree of control, than with keeping COSATU in check.

Because of severe fiscal and budgetary constraints, among other anti-working class measures demanded by Gear, the ANC is desperately trying to manage its declining credibility and rising anger and disillusionment in the broad working class, and particularly among its own members. Between 1990 and 1999, its membership fell by half, to about half a million. It also suffered setbacks in the 2000 local

government elections.

The biggest political question of the day is: how long will the ANC manage to contain COSATU before the latter breaks free from the alliance and takes an independent course? If COSATU left the alliance, it would dramatically alter the political landscape and pose the most serious threat to ANC rule. This is why the ANC needs COSATU more than COSATU needs the ANC.

COSATU's leaders have strained themselves to the utmost in trying to justify participation in the alliance to union members who have grown increasingly disillusioned with ANC policies. As the crisis deepens because of these policies, COSATU leaders have tried to walk a tightrope between the demands of members and those of the ANC. How long will those who lead the federation manage to contain the membership and head off a mandate for quitting the alliance? Pressures to break with the alliance can only grow as conditions worsen and union leaders risk losing credibility.

The executives of all parties in the alliance have combined to prevent a rupture, but bureaucratic measures cannot outweigh a social crisis that worsens workers' conditions. Sooner or later, they will move in the direction their situation demands. Because of their history of militancy and the impact of the crisis, workers in COSATU will decide to quit the alliance much sooner than their leaders. So far, ANC pressure on COSATU to stay in the alliance has been greater than pressure from workers to break with it. To a large extent, shopstewards and office-bearers have also played a containing role because of pressure exerted on them by branch and national officials. But as the national congresses of SAMWU and NUMSA showed last year, certain affiliates are



Waiting for a job: unemployment can generate opposition to the ANC.

strongly inclined to leave the alliance if attacks by the ANC continue. How the internal dynamics within and between affiliates play themselves out in the three years before the 2004 general election will determine what happens to COSATU in the longer term. This perspective is premised on the likelihood that conditions facing COSATU and the working class as a whole will deteriorate over the next three years, and that a fundamental shift in ANC policy is unlikely to take place.

It has become increasingly clear in recent years that remaining in the alliance will continue to weaken COSATU. It has not always been able to fend off attacks by the ANC and defend itself and the gains made by workers over the years. The weakening of the federation expresses itself in the compromises the ANC has forced it to make. Still the most powerful mass organisation in South Africa, COSATU's mass campaign to stop Gear and the privatisation-driven iGoli 2002 plan, or defeat its most negative aspects,

was constrained by pressures from within the alliance. There are many examples of how the alliance has become a liability for the federation, rather than a source of strength. It did not stop the ANC government from adopting Gear, prevent the recent amendments to labour law or head off the multibillion rand arms procurement deal.

As long as COSATU remains in the alliance, it will not be able to act in its own interests and those of the broader working class. That the alliance has seriously compromised the independence of COSATU is beyond doubt. Take the united front, which I believe has been urgently needed since the introduction of Gear. COSATU was in the best position to spearhead this initiative, the strongest weapon against attacks on the working class. If such a front had been based on fighting Gear – the greatest threat to the working class as a whole – it could have rallied behind it other union federations, as well as civic and non-governmental

organisations (NGOs). But nothing has happened in this regard, and nothing will while COSATU remains in the alliance.' Southall says that despite COSATU's 'extremely strong criticism of Gear' it has remained in the alliance. He fails to see that such criticism has not been backed by strong and sustained mass action - which is why the ANC has not taken the criticism seriously.

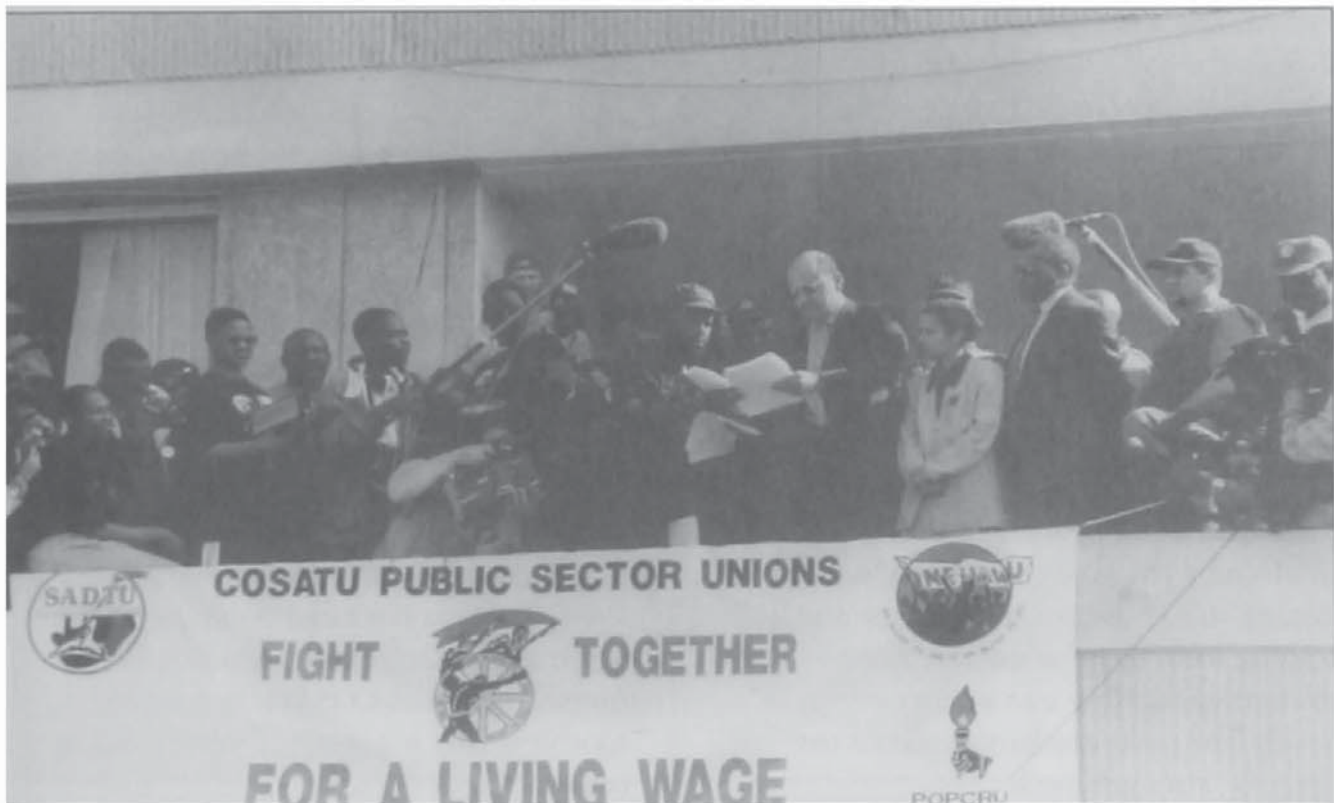
Southall uncritically restates the views of 'conservative', 'radical' and 'corporatist' critics of the ANC but does not really analyse what they say. An example is the conservative view of COSATU as a labour aristocracy in relation to the unemployed. This is a neo-liberal view that falls squarely into the agenda of the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the World Bank. Their aim is to exacerbate divisions in the working class and provide a rationale for further belt-tightening, wage restraint and other attacks on labour. Different sections and layers of the working class experience different levels of poverty. But this does not mean the better-off must prostrate themselves before the capitalist agenda. Likewise, the view that COSATU's membership of the alliance makes it a 'partner in privilege' promotes the interests of capital and the ruling party.

Southall's support of the corporatist model is wrong for other reasons, too. The corporatist view that South Africa is a better place to live in now than it was before 1994 is correct in a general sense, but not in regard to the material condition of the masses. Since 1994, the country has had a fragile and limited bourgeois democratic order. There can be no true democracy amid growing poverty, hunger, unemployment and homelessness. People cannot live on votes or from what is said to be one of the world's best constitutions. Because of our history, the declining quality of liberal democracy within a

globalised capitalist framework will be starker than elsewhere. Last year's labour law amendments illustrate this. In a period of supposed transformation, the amendments rolled back worker gains after hard struggles under apartheid.

Southall does not really analyse the arguments of the corporatists. Over the past two decades - even before the onset of globalisation in the late '80s after the demise of the Stalinist regimes - corporatism was under increasing strain in Europe. A growing economic crisis reduced the ability of the state and capital to fund social democratic programmes. Globalisation has exacerbated the crisis by means of technological change and through the greater mobility of capital, which intensified competition in world markets where previous barriers had fallen. Today, the generous European welfare state of earlier decades is a thing of the past, with little or no prospect of renewal.

In addition, there is no possibility that South Africa - where capitalism and democracy developed under different conditions from Europe - can reproduce the kind of social democracy Scandinavia and Europe once enjoyed. Our bourgeois democracy was hamstrung from the outset by the severe structural constraints on local capitalism, which after seven years of 'transformation' and 'transition' cannot pay decent wages or give workers a decent standard of living. This is why the notion of a black labour aristocracy in South Africa is questionable. Just as the black bourgeoisie has arrived too late on the historical stage to supplant the white bourgeoisie, so too the black working class arrived too late to enjoy the living standards racial capitalism gave white workers. This is why the fight to fulfil workers' basic needs is inseparably tied to the fight against capitalist globalisation.



The ANC is concerned with keeping COSATU in check.

It was a misfortune for black workers that liberal democracy dawned in South Africa at a time when the forces of globalisation – already unleashed against the working class in Europe – were imported in the form of Gear. The effect was to undermine socioeconomic transformation here. Globalisation and the ANC's own nationalist petty bourgeois leaders, coupled with a multi-class alliance, dealt that prospect a severe blow. The right of black workers to vote for the first time, and many other important democratic changes, failed to translate into fundamental improvements in material conditions.

How much are the ANC's compromises the result of its history, leadership and class character, and to what extent did they flow from enormous external pressures inherent in globalisation at a time when socialism was in retreat across the world? While it is clear that the ANC's make-up made it easier to compromise,

could a socialist party have resisted these powerful pressures? There has been little analysis of this question.

Corporatism needs to be understood at the organisational level – in relation to the ANC, COSATU and the SACP – and in relation to the racial capitalism, which forms the historical background in South Africa. The obverse of reformism, it has little chance of success in South Africa because of the uniquely brutal exploitation and oppression of black labour made possible by racial capitalism. The marriage of this legacy and globalisation seriously limits liberal democracy in South Africa, posing a problem for white employers and the ANC.

It also defines the tortuous wrangling and often deep rifts between labour and capital in Nedlac. South Africa's history has impoverished the amenable soil in which reformism and corporatism can grow.

Government has the power to take policy decisions on any matter in the absence of an agreement in Nedlac, and

can choose whether, and to what extent, to seek formal agreements there. This is why working class voices have questioned the purpose and future of Nedlac, and why the social compact in this country has little chance of success.

To justify the alliance between the ANC and COSATU as a strategic compromise, therefore, betrays an agenda – to keep COSATU shackled to the ANC in the interests of that party and capital. Nowhere else in the world has the labour partner in a ruling alliance been attacked so often by the governing party, while singing the praises of the alliance and arguing for it to be maintained and strengthened. How can a relationship in which one party steadily weakens the other be strengthened?

For Southall to state that COSATU's departure from the alliance would give the ANC freedom to pursue more 'strongly capitalist, neo-liberal policies' and push it closer to the DA is an alarmist red herring. After Gear and the labour law amendments, how much further along the path of neo-liberalism can the ANC go? In addition, the ANC cannot move much further to the right because its support base is rooted in COSATU and the black working class.

The ANC's avowed opposition to white racism, its deep antipathy towards the DA and the fierce electoral rivalry between the two parties rule out any joint pursuit of a more naked neo-liberal path. In fact, they are more likely to make it seek stronger ties with the black working class.

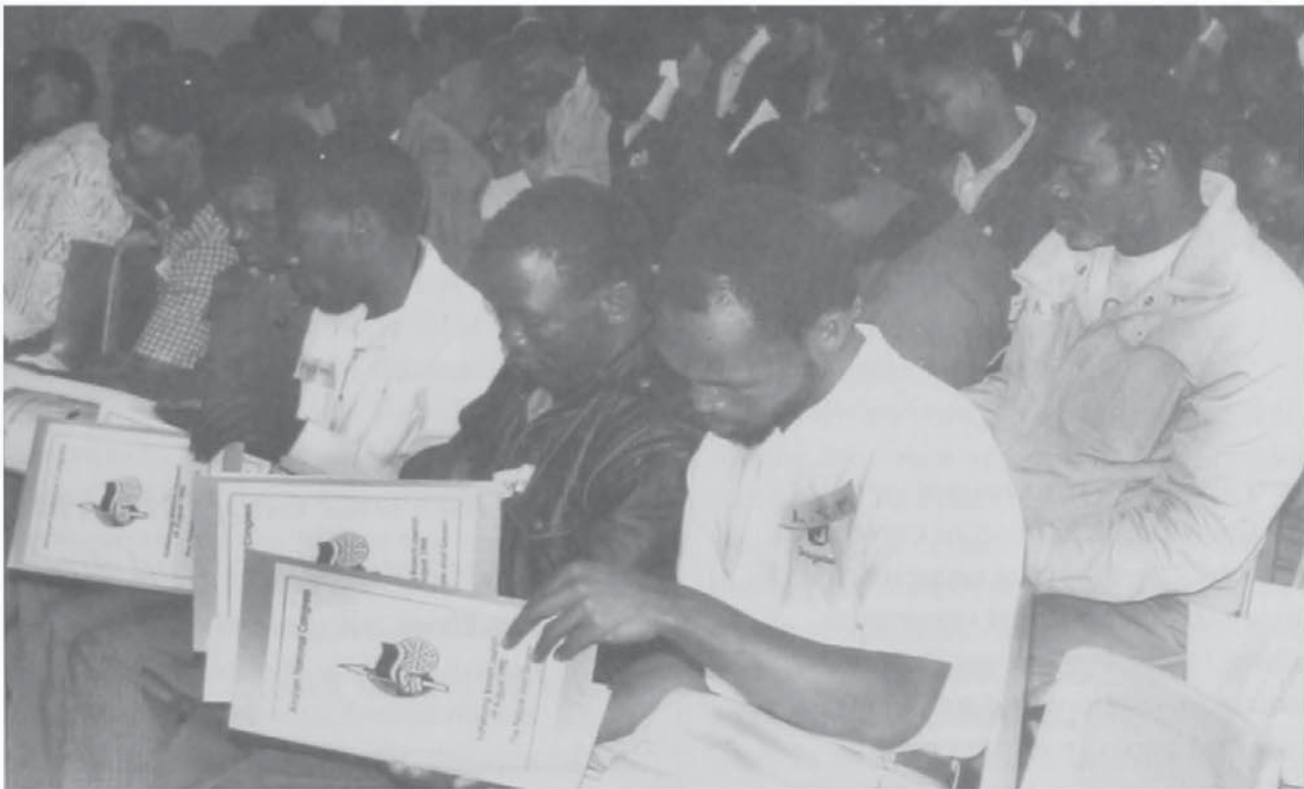
Southall warns that a COSATU breakaway from the alliance would be 'much more complicated and messy than radicals imply' and that it would be 'extremely risky' to form a worker's party, but says little about the potentially graver dangers of remaining an alliance partner.

He warns workers that in competition with the ANC, their party would have great difficulty raising election funding, and that there would be nasty courtroom battles within unions over finances, pension funds and other investments. With a membership of close to two million, and its affiliation to an international federation with 125 million members, COSATU could surely raise the necessary funds, even in competition with the ANC.

Southall urges COSATU to remain in the alliance and contest its increasing marginalisation. But that is precisely what the federation has been doing in the years since the ANC adopted Gear. Southall himself says that COSATU is now so toothless that it cannot counter despotic tendencies in the ANC.

While Southall recognises the growing potential for an alliance between COSATU and NGOs, he refers to the possibility of forging a 'multi-class alliance'. He goes on to raise questions about the criteria COSATU would use in entering such an alliance, and if it would be on a 'multi-class, radical democratic basis, or would go further by appealing for socialism'. The prior question is: What criteria should COSATU use for *remaining* in an alliance in the face of the many attacks on it by its alliance partner?

The answer to this would apply to his question about the criteria for *entering* another alliance: that although it might have other class elements – but not the big bosses – it must be led by workers with a socialist programme. The effects of Gear and globalisation has strengthened, not weakened, the fight for socialism. We need a united front of, union, community, non-governmental and other progressive organisations. COSATU is still best placed to lead such a front. Events over the past few years have made it painfully clear that COSATU can only rely on itself and the



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broader working class.

One of the following scenarios will unfold over the next few years. The first is that an ANC government wedded to a neo-liberal programme will continue its attacks on COSATU, and that this will undermine the relationship to a point where many members would favour withdrawal from the alliance. However, because of the differences within and between affiliates, and the influence of leaders and shopstewards over the mass membership, ruptures will occur, NUMSA and SAMWU gave strong notice of this possibility last year. This is likely to lead to a split within COSATU, with disaffected sections hiving off to form another federation. This would be a tragedy for working class unity.

Another possibility is that COSATU will stay in the alliance, with debilitating consequences for all affiliates, until a few large and strategic affiliates summon the resolve to break away. These could form the basis for a new regrouping, which would seek broader unity with other

unions and community organisations, leading to a worker's party at a later stage. Given the weakness of the left outside the alliance, it is most unlikely that a worker's party would emerge without a strong union base. The unions will remain the key to any worker's party.

An alternative scenario is perhaps even more dangerous: that COSATU as a whole hobbles along in the alliance with its strength steadily waning, until it becomes a sad shadow of its past.

The final possibility is that the federation as a whole decides to leave the alliance and becomes the master of its own destiny. The longer it takes to reach that decision, the weaker it may be when it makes its move. That is why resolving this matter as soon as possible deserves the highest priority. ★

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