

Township protests, militant strikes

Rethinking the left's approach

South Africans were amazed to see a spate of township protests following the ANC's strong re-election in April. **Peter Dwyer** and **Leo Zeilig** discuss what they think the meaning of these protests together with militant strikes is for the South African left.

The images on our TV screens of jubilant South Africans at the FIFA Confederations Cup in June were quickly replaced by images of South Africans burning tyres and building barricades in townships as another wave of protests and strikes swept the country. In scenes reminiscent of apartheid, police clashed with unemployed township protestors and striking workers.

This comes just months after the April re-election of the African National Congress (ANC) and the new President Jacob Zuma. Zuma was seen by many, particularly those in the giant trade union federation the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), as representing a new start for the ANC government after 12 years of neo-liberal policies imposed by former President Thabo Mbeki. The protests and strikes caught people by surprise with some commentators expressing disbelief at the level of political anger at a government elected with 66% of the vote just months ago.

In July in Siyathemba, a small mining and farming town in Mpumalanga province, the local ANC mayor, Lefty Tsotetsi, arrived in an armoured police car to address local residents but he was advised it was too dangerous for him to get

out of the car. Protestors carrying clubs and pipes accused him of living in luxury and giving out jobs to his friends and family. Despite promising to improve services in the future, the new house he was building was set alight.

In an attempt to deflect the anger at the failure of service delivery, the government has blamed 'municipal incapacity' and has pleaded for more time to clean out inefficient and corrupt councillors. They have even threatened to use the Municipal Act that will allow the government to take control of 'failing municipalities'. However, protesters blame the failure of service delivery on ANC appointees and corrupt ANC politicians.

With reports of protestors attacking African immigrants and migrant workers, some mainstream commentators have sought to describe the protests as simply a repeat of the outbreak of xenophobic attacks that rocked South Africa in May 2008 when 150 people were left dead, hundreds injured and 30 000 people (mainly foreign nationals) internally displaced.

The reality is quite different. In Siyathemba for example, violence was sparked when police fired rubber bullets, teargas and live ammunition on people leaving a community meeting on 19 July.

Protesters set fire to two buildings. On the Monday, foreign-owned shops were looted and the press quickly reported this as another outbreak of xenophobia. Whilst there may have been some anti-foreigner sentiment, this was limited and condemned by local protest leaders.

There are three central factors in understanding what has been going on.

Firstly, in 2006, for example, there were approximately 6 000 township and community protests across South Africa. These were largely local-based revolts against the failure of the ANC government to satisfy 'service delivery'. These revolts occurred at a greater rate than any other country in the world and were often organised by SACP and ANC militants.

The growth of 'social movements' in the country after 1999 emerged partly as an attempt to coordinate these struggles against the ANC's relentless commoditisation and privatisation of basic services.

So far, none of this is new to readers of *SA Labour Bulletin*.

FAILURE OF RADICAL LEFT

In terms of new analysis, the second vital element for us in recent South African politics has been the shift towards the working class in 2006. The violent security

guard and cleaners' strikes were cautious awakenings. While the social movements and community revolts involved the unemployed, informal workers and union militants who were active in these movements, but not the leading element.

Between 2003 and 2006, the number of days lost to strikes rose from 500 000 to 2.6 million, mostly in 2006. But this was small fry, compared to what was to come. In June 2007 there was the extraordinary public sector general strike. This was the largest strike in South African history. It lasted four weeks, and consisted of 11 million strike days. Strike support groups were set up, militant pickets guarded workplaces, and political slogans critical of the ANC slowly emerged. In a Nehawu union strike meeting in 2007, a speaker shouted, "Viva ANC!" but silence and insults followed. Throughout the strike, one striker after another repeated the refrain, "We put them where they are and look how they treat us." The strike opened up the possibility of an alternative that began to question the old slogans and parties.

But there was a problem. The South African left outside the Alliance

saw the fulcrum of the struggle exclusively in the social movements and failed to respond to these new developments. Cosatu's role in the government has led many activists on the left to discount the role of the working class. There was no consistent attempt to orientate towards those strikes and protests in workplaces and unions by any of the left. There were exceptions but these were largely weak, inconsistent and often limited to messages of solidarity or the occasional argument in the Anti Privatisation Forum (APF).

As a consequence of these failures, the APF as a symbol and organisational example of the political uprisings against the commoditisation and failures since 2000 is dead. The failure to lead, organise and develop a working-class base inside the trade unions has been a disaster for the development of a radical left in the country.

Political transformations have followed from labour struggles. The last important event came in December 2007 at the ANC Polokwane congress. These events represented a revolt against Mbeki's neo-liberalism. The coup against Mbeki was only a matter of time.

WAY FORWARD: UNITY AND DEBATES

It is very difficult to know what the political fallout of this late wave of protests and strikes will be. There is always talk of the Alliance between the ANC, Cosatu and the SACP breaking up but many leading activists still feel that it is better to work inside of the Alliance.

But the Alliance is still wracked with contradictions and tensions. There is still general confusion on the left about what type of organisation the ANC is. For example the radical National Union of Mineworkers said that the protests were the result of policies led by "neo-liberal agents in government" but also accused some protestors of being "opportunists and reactionary forces" who are manipulating the township protests.

What is clear is that the militant strikes and the township protests over the last few years have had the cumulative effect of blowing apart the neo-liberal consensus in the Alliance. Many hoped the election of Zuma as president would begin a period of social stability. The difference this time is that whilst previous protests have focused on issues such as lack of water and housing, today's protests are more generalised and violent.

This climate of rebellion creates immense opportunities and challenges for socialists to help organise the protests and help unite the struggles of the unemployed township poor and the working poor into a political alternative that can begin to challenge the dominance of the ANC.

Much of the shock at the recent wave of protests so soon after the election is a failure to understand the significance of Zuma's election and Mbeki's defeat. The Alliance left, including elements of Cosatu/SACP and millions who



In 2006 there were 6 000 township protests against the ANC government's failure to deliver.

voted for the ANC saw Zuma as a new broom. While we believe Zuma is a false messiah this is not the point. He tantalised millions with the possibility of a new future for South Africa's poor.

Dale McKinley has written recently about the challenges for the left but much of his analysis is problematic. The emergence of social movements from the late 1990s may be important but it was the recent strikes that destroyed Mbeki. This has clearly had a significant effect on the Alliance.

The emergence of the social movements produced the first cracks in the ANC monolith, proving that you can challenge the ANC's commitment to neo-liberalism. But for us it was the presence of the working class on the streets, in strikes and on picket lines that finally snapped Mbeki's hold over South Africa. McKinley, in contrast, argues the social movements were responsible for turning the tables on Mbeki.

Zuma triggered the convergence of opposition to Mbeki's politics, which breathed new confidence into Cosatu and the SACP. The election created renewed opportunities to push back the neo-liberal agenda. We cannot rely on Zuma and his government, but we can force them to listen to extra-parliamentary struggle, which will continue to be a combination of both organised labour (Cosatu) and social movements. This shifting constellation of popular forces will have the working class at its heart.

The way forward must see a unity between the organised working class and the township unemployed. The disaster for the South African left has been a politics that has celebrated only the resistance of the 'poors' while ignoring and denigrating the struggles of the organised employed.



The 2006 security strike: between 2003 and 2006 the number of days lost to strikes rose from 500 000 to 2.6 million.

William Matlala

For united and cohesive movements to develop, the left must unite workers and unemployed protests. While Cosatu and the SACP do not offer a counter-hegemonic alternative, such politics can emerge from this unity. Activists understand that movements do not emerge fully formed but through a process of struggle and engagement. The xenophobic attacks last year, and violence and domestic abuse widespread across South Africa, expresses how people's frustrations are diverted.

McKinley is correct in arguing for a unity in the working class but there is concealed hostility to Cosatu and the SACP in his approach.

One obvious step in achieving unity would be a united front of popular struggles seeking to unite township protests and the organised working class. Cosatu would be central to this united front, forging links with the unemployed and the unorganised in the formal and informal sectors. McKinley assumes that we can ignore the leadership of Cosatu and the SACP, and that unity is simply a game of leapfrog. But

millions respect the leadership of these organisations.

Instead, our struggles need a common platform of demands in which everyone can unite, irrespective of political allegiances. This politics speaks of years of united movements, where we march and protest on what joins us while debating what does not.

This future of common struggle is a challenge to the leadership of Cosatu and the SACP but also the various independent organisations of social movements such as Abahlali base Mjondolo, APE, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and others. It offers the prospect of a unified struggle against neo-liberalism in South Africa.

The South African left has a responsibility to unify against neo-liberal capitalism, which will inspire the continent, north of the Limpopo, to do the same. LB

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