

When things fall apart

The 'left' within the ANC emerged from the recent National General Council (NGC) meeting 'victorious' that President Thabo Mbeki and his bourgeois project had suffered a major setback following a grassroots revolt. Is this the full story? What did the left really win? The **Labour Bulletin** explores this and argues that many unanswered questions remain around what kind of ANC members want.

'What is the courage today? It is not a willingness to confront the state and risk detention, torture and assassination. It is dealing in a principled way with the multiple little awkwardnesses and embarrassments of daily life. It is making choices to follow the harder, less traveled road. It is holding fast to principle in everyday matters where it would be easier just to go along. It is standing up to power itself, even from within power. It is openness to criticisms and willingness to accept rebuke and acknowledge error.'

Albie Sachs,
The Free Diary of Albie Sachs. p24

The ANC NGC, held at the University of Pretoria, was supposed to be a platform to reflect on what the organisation had done since its conference in Stellenbosch in 2002 and issues which should be tabled at the 2007 conference. With this in mind, various reports were circulated (for deliberation) ahead of the conference:

- The general secretaries' organisational reports
- A discussion document on 'Development and Underdevelopment: Learning from experience to overcome the two economy divide'
- The National Question

- Unity and Diversity in the ANC. Debate and deliberations at any party and/or union conference are invariably linked to the politics of who is up for election. It is clear that in the build-up to the 2007 conference, the issue of succession will dominate the political terrain as it did this NGC. In this climate, it is inevitable the real policy debates tend to take a back seat or are used by different groupings to forward a particular agenda. The *Labour Bulletin* (26 (6)) argued ahead of the 2002 ANC national conference: 'The politics ahead of any party conference have their own set of dynamics with different factions, groupings or individuals either vying for power or trying to retain their existing power base... So, against this backdrop of political intrigue and infighting what forces are at play?... Is it about the fight for the heart and soul of the ANC by so-called left forces against rightwing elements?'

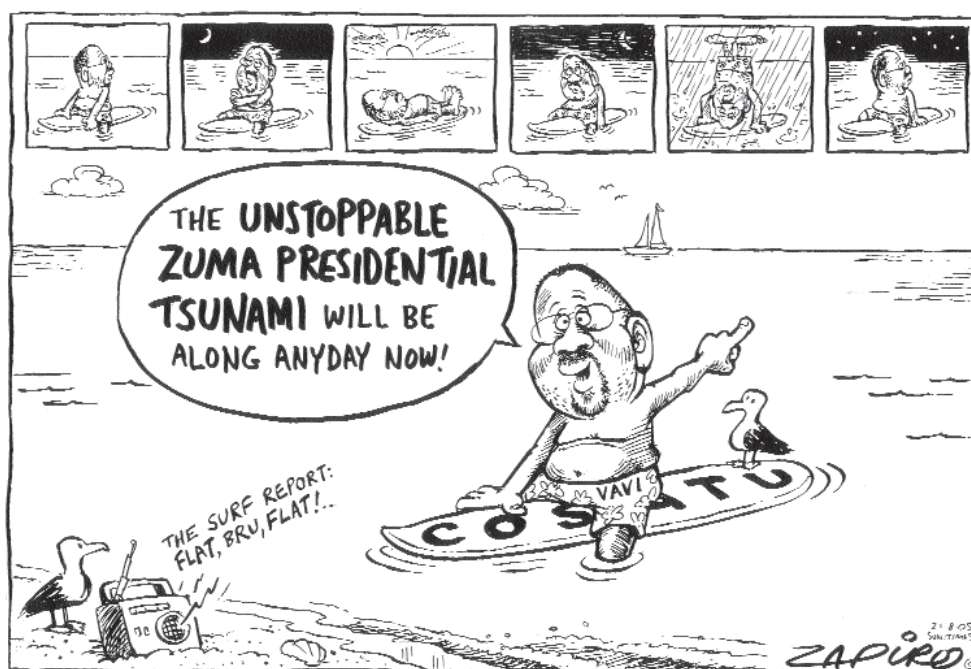
Developments at the NGC and the more recent Cosatu central committee (see p51) reveal that there appears to be a fight to 'reclaim' the ANC for the 'left' with former deputy president Jacob Zuma being used as the rallying point. Much has already been made of the 'revolt' from grassroots activists who stood up, asserted themselves and challenged the ANC leadership. What remains unanswered, at this point, is

whether this 'revolt' has a real left agenda or is based on opportunistic intentions? Are there real progressive voices behind such an attack to reclaim the heart and soul of the ANC?

A LEFT VICTORY?

The answers to these questions will determine whether the left achieved a real victory at the NGC. Will this revolt translate into the return of grassroots vibrancy within ANC structures on the ground? If the NGC was about the left defending the national liberation character of the ANC, what is the left really defending when the organisation is in a state of degeneration and moral decay? The key issue which needs to be explored further is what does a left victory mean beyond Zuma and fighting President Thabo Mbeki? If the left within the ANC does achieve its objective of reclaiming back the ANC and winning back positions in the highest echelons of the ANC and government, what strategies will it put in place to ensure the country survives in the current global order? Does the left have a viable alternative agenda? And what will it do in the context of a corrupt ANC?

A real victory would be if the spirit reflected at the NGC was translated into a renewed vibrancy in party structures and the ability of these structures to take on



national structures and begin to influence the direction of the party. While populist rhetoric (around Zuma) and narrow self-interests might be sufficient to win the day at the NGC and subsequent conferences, is this approach sustainable in the long term?

NGC OUTCOMES

While debate on labour market reforms and the merits or otherwise of a dual labour market dominated debate, there was an acknowledgement of the need for an industrial strategy and an active, developmental state (how this would translate into practice is yet to be determined). While the country should be grateful that there is a renewed focus on industrial policy, there should be some acknowledgement that this debate is more than 10 years old and the dti was supposed to have finalised its thinking around this some years ago (see SALB 26(3)). Aside from this 'revelation' about the need for an industrial policy other outcomes from the NGC included the following

- Reinstating Zuma as an active part of the ANC's activities from which he had earlier recused himself.
- Rejecting the majority of recommendations aimed at 'modernising' the ANC. This was partly because the recommendations were seen to be about 'strengthening the centralised managerial control of the ANC, diluting the working

class character of ANC branches (with proposed special 'sectoral' branches for different groupings of people), and 'modernising' the ANC into a more electoral entity (with a parallel 'parliamentary' party structure).

- The NGC called for the review of the president's power to appoint premiers, mayors etc.
- The secretary general (SG) must start a process for organisational development. While much has been made of the SG's honest assessment of the ANC's organisational problems, there has been little or no acknowledgement that many of these problems are not new and emerged in previous SG reports. Hence, the challenge is whether resources will be given to drive an organisational development process?
- A number of anti-corruption measures were proposed. Were all of those proposed by the SG adopted?
- Linked to the question of corruption is the need to address the long debated issue of funding of political parties - how to ensure it occurs in a transparent and accountable way?

CONCLUSION

The NGC raises more questions than were actually answered. While broad debate on policy did take place, the focus was on broad principle positions without dealing

with practical implementation issues. For example, does South Africa want to be a second world economy or first world economy? While rejecting the organisational redesign proposals, what kind of ANC do members want and what kind of ANC are we trying to build? Is the ANC really a third world national liberation movement anchored in the townships, squatter camps and rural villages of our country, as portrayed by the SA Communist Party? There is a fight for different people's perceptions of what the ANC should be. The one view is that the ANC should be about economic patronage while the other is about going back to the party of Oliver Tambo. Is either position realistic?

If the ANC is serious about organisational redesign then the first step should be about winning the vision of what the organisation should be and once that has occurred then a document should be circulated for discussion.

While some movement was made in the area of policy, the critical question remains whether the ANC is directing government policy? Many people do not believe this, which was clearly demonstrated in the comments made by deputy finance minister Jabu Moleketi within days of the NGC. While Cosatu and the SACP's exasperation is understandable it is however, foolish to think that they have a new backer to forward and deliver a left project.