

For many the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was about the symbolism of the events that transpired on 31 August 2002 when two separate marches were held – one under the banner of the tripartite alliance and the other organised by the Social Movements United (SMU). The march organised in opposition to the Alliance march attracted far larger numbers and as a result is being viewed by some as the first and biggest demonstration against the new government since it came into power in 1994.

While one cannot ignore the significance of the march, its size had a lot to do with coinciding with the biggest international global conference held in recent history.

It would be naïve to both under and overestimate the significance of the rise of alternative social movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF), and Landless People's Movement. These single-issue based organisations are articulating the dissatisfaction of many people on the ground. As many observers have stated, the march served as an important signpost that there are rumblings on the ground. And what of the relationship between Cosatu and the social movements which have emerged over the last year or so? Cosatu has been criticised for failing to align itself with some of these social movements because it has succumbed to pressure from the ANC. On the other hand, it faces criticism from within the ANC for its 'ultra-left' tendencies. Cosatu agrees with many of the issues raised by the different social movements. However, it disagrees with their tactics and strategies. They are opposed to this government in principle, whereas Cosatu is opposed to specific government policies. Ultimately, is Cosatu in a position to lead a left-political agenda? Has the left attempted to shift the burden to Cosatu to form an alternative political structure? If so, why? – *the editor*

Whither social movements in SA?



There can be no doubt that last month's demonstrations against the WSSD have had an effect on South African politics. Ebrahim Harvey explores how such action could lead to a more militant mass movement to challenge government's economic policies, which are being blamed for rising hardships amongst the black working class – its traditional support base. Herein lies the source of the resurgence of mass opposition and growing support for 'social movements'.

The march by 15 000 to 20 000 people under the banner of SMU will go down in our history as a reminder to the ANC that their economic policies are the main reason for growing mass opposition. The march took place against a backdrop of growing dissatisfaction with water and electricity cut-offs and evictions across the country. But why else was the impact of this event such a defining moment in the growing struggles against neoliberalism in this country?

- It took place not only during, but

also more importantly against, the WSSD, under the spotlight of the world's media.

- It was the biggest political demonstration against the ANC-led government by forces outside the ANC-alliance since 1994.
- The presence of many protesters from other countries highlighted the growing internationalism of social movements and their equally growing organisational capacities.
- The march from dirt-poor and black Alexandra to stinking-rich and largely white Sandton was of great

symbolic, ideological and political significance. The chasmic racial-class divide between these two places sharply encapsulates the post-apartheid situation in our country, reminding us of the terrible limitations of our political victory over apartheid. Despite many democratic rights poverty has not only persisted but has worsened.

But it would be a mistake to think there are no problems with the SMU (which consists of the Social Movement Indaba (SMI), an amalgamation of left-leaning groups centred around the small but growing APF, the LPM, allied to the National Land Committee, and other social movements from around the world) and that it does not face serious and difficult challenges in the years ahead.

This does not in the least detract from the huge significance of the successful march. The fact that the different formations of the SMU had different and even conflicting political banners – ranging from support for Robert Mugabe to others, which bizarrely called on Osama bin Laden to bomb Sandton, are clear indications of its political, ideological and organisational heterogeneity. Though the march did not take place under a clear and common programme of demands, serious programmatic differences are unlikely to emerge between them in so far as the situation in this country goes. Why is that? So glaring have been the attacks on working and poor people – such as water and electricity cut-offs, evictions, land deprivation and increasing brutal police-state repression – that a whole range of distinctly different organisations could form a united front around a common set of demands.

Where were the other social formations?

Where were the key and powerful



organisations, like the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African NGO Coalition (Sangoco)? Well, once again, but only this time more obsequiously, Cosatu appeared to bow to pressure from the ANC to join a march they organised just a week before when it became clear that the anti-government and anti-WSSD march organised by the SMU was going ahead. Considering their huge support base, Cosatu hardly featured at the alliance-led march. The biggest mass organisation in this country – by virtue of its servile relationship with the ANC – was reduced to a damp squib on the day. Instead of placing themselves at the head of the SMU march they were dragged into a march for which they were clearly not prepared and which was an embarrassing failure.

Though not in an alliance with the ANC, the more centrist and equivocating (precisely due to the pressure of ANC-leaning groups within it) the Sangoco-led Global Civil Society Forum at Nasrec, Johannesburg –

which the ANC called upon to participate in their contrived march – also appeared submerged and outflanked by the strong and effective mass mobilisation the SMI achieved in the run-up to their march. So effective were these protests and so blatant was the much-publicised police repression of it that Sangoco ran the risk of further political alienation from the ruling party by a late withdrawal from the ANC-led march. Why? To participate in such a march ran an even greater political risk of alienating themselves from the vital social forces assembled under the umbrella of the SMU. But the reason Sangoco gave for their pullout was 'ANC control' of the march, which is itself significant. But the lesson here is that all forms of centrism, but particularly 'left' centrism, are being devoured by the deep polarisation of class forces due to the devastating social effects of the ANC's pro-capitalist economic policies. Any middle ground politics within the black working class will be steadily eroded under the impact of these



intense pressures.

A big weakness of the SMU march was the fact that they did not have a strong trade union contingent in their line up. But, in a sense, that is all the more reason why the huge turnout for their march was a remarkable success. In spite of the formal absence of unions – though some members of certain Cosatu-affiliated unions were present – they still managed to assemble such huge support. For them to acquire active union support will be very hard. So long as Cosatu remains under ANC control within their alliance, they will not participate in struggles led by movements such as the SMI, even if it is in their interests to do so. The National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) is facing a crisis of its own and has become less politically involved and militant over the years. Fedusa follows an openly neoliberal and conservative line in most of its policies and is largely apolitical.

Faced with this set of realities, it would appear that the torch-bearers of a new and different future – where right to an uninterrupted supply of free and/or affordable basic services – is not going to come from the unions but from outside its ranks. But because union members live alongside those fighting under the banner of

organisations like the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee and the APF it may not be long before we see stronger ties between them. This could sooner rather than later break the stranglehold the ANC-alliance leadership has over them and pave the way for united struggles for those basic rights that so many died for under apartheid. It is a shameful reflection of the ANC-led government that millions of people have suffered water and electricity cut-offs and evictions since the dawn of democracy in 1994. These are social crimes, the extent of which not even the much-hated racist apartheid regime of the past committed.

Can these movements sustain themselves in the future?

For now the difficult question the SMI and the LPM need to thrash out is: where to now and how do they organisationally sustain and develop the huge gains made during the WSSD. If an organisational vehicle is not found – such as perhaps forming a united front (somewhat similar to the earlier United Democratic Front) – these gains could sadly be dissipated and lost. For the great and difficult tasks that lie ahead ad hoc structures will not do. Neither will an approach that appears

not to be too concerned with the organisational and programmatic content of social movements.

Whether for revolutionary or electoral purposes the key question remains party political organisation. Unfortunately social movement politics appears to short-sightedly bask in the glory of immediate and short-term mobilisation gains without addressing the more crucial question of how to link these with political organisation and the struggle for power. The result is a discernible empiricism, which mainly counts the number and size of marchers and is less concerned with how that links up with the broader and long-term issues of power relations within the context of constitutional, parliamentary and electoral politics.

But because a revolutionary insurrection in this country is very unlikely for at least the next ten years, it is imperative for left-leaning social movements to develop the capacity to contest elections as the only road to power over this period. A big mistake will be that of not pursuing this path because of the overwhelming electoral domination of the ANC and its entrenched control of the machinery and resources of the state. Because of its policies and actions the ANC is bound to lose substantially more support in the 2004 elections. The big question is whether a political force from the left-leaning social movements can emerge between now and then? If not the actual decline in the mass support the ANC enjoyed will only marginally be reflected in the electoral results. Faced with no clear and strong alternative most of our people – even those most disillusioned with the ANC – will probably vote again for the ANC. This historically tendentious law is playing itself out in our country and is a really hard nut that only dissenting mass pressure can crack.

Ebrahim Harvey is a political writer and commentator.



If YOU can answer YES to 9 of these questions...

A responsible worker:

1. has South Africa's interests at heart
2. is in favour of economic growth
3. is a valuable asset to his/her company
4. believes in strikes to solve problems
5. is not militant
6. wants to be part of a trade-union with a strong power base
7. seeks solutions to problems
8. wants to achieve success in his/her work
9. can take a strong stand
10. has a win-win predisposition

YES

NO

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then you should belong to UASA

