

Xenophobia and working class movement

In the run up to a Cosatu Conference of the Left and in the wake of recent xenophobic violence, **Martin Legassick** examines what he sees as a weak and bankrupt South African Left. He contends that Cosatu should break with the Tripartite Alliance in favour of a workers' party. He also argues for the abandonment of the two stage theory which he believes is a major obstacle in the attainment of socialism.

Any decent South African feels ashamed by the wave of xenophobic attacks on fellow-Africans which swept the country after 11 May. Let us be clear. These were not attacks fostered by a "criminal element" (even if criminals were involved), by a "third force", or by "right-wingers" as government ministers argued (*moegoes* – silly fools – as correctly identified by the *Mail & Guardian*). These were at root attacks by ordinary people, poor people, on other poor people.

The township attackers accused fellow-Africans dwellers of "stealing jobs", of "taking houses" and so on. In other words, they were expressions of extreme resentment at the 40% joblessness in the country, the some 5 million backlog in houses, as well as rapidly rising food prices. But they directed their anger against neighbours rather than where the responsibility lies, with the government.

Unfortunately these attacks created deep divisions amongst township dwellers, and weakened the working class.

That these social conditions exist, the failure in service delivery, the failure to dent the unemployment figures, the crisis of Eskom can be blamed on the neo-liberal policies of the ANC government. Opposition to such policies was expressed through the social movements which emerged in the townships to oppose neo-liberalism from 2000 onwards.

Moreover, in sponsoring the Proudly South African campaign the government has helped to create a climate of passive xenophobia which contributed also to these attacks [see also 'Xenophobic violence: Trade unions found wanting'.

But it is not only the government that is to blame. What has the 'Left' done, since 1994, to organise the discontent against the GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) strategy and service delivery failures? The failure of the Left in South Africa to present a clear alternative to the ANC government for the masses bears a heavy responsibility for these attacks. In my view, it is the SACP (South African Communist Party) leadership which is to blame. It disallowed the

organisation of an alternative because of its blind support for the Tripartite Alliance.

OPTIONS FOR THE LEFT

What options now exist for a strong Left to emerge?

Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Union) issued statements against the conversion of the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme) into GEAR and, belatedly, was joined by the SACP. Both these organisations were marginalised, despite the so-called Tripartite Alliance, under Mbeki's presidency. Mbeki called the SACP leaders "liars" and "charlatans" engaged in "fake revolutionary posturing" in 1998. Minister of Defence Mosiuoa Lekota accused Cosatu of a "lack of revolutionary discipline" in 1999. In 2002 Mbeki attacked the SACP and Cosatu as "left sectarian factions" which occupied "the same trench with the anti-socialist forces". Yet through it all they suffered more or less in silence.

Now the leadership of Cosatu and the SACP are supporting Jacob

Zuma as a successor to Mbeki. But what will Zuma do differently? He has repeatedly assured foreign and local capitalists that he will make no change whatsoever in the ANC's neo-liberal economic policies.

Recently, it appears, even Zwelinzima Vavi is becoming fed up with Zuma, criticising him at the recent Alliance summit because the ANC had not shifted to the left. The *Cape Times* reported in May this year however "... even after Cosatu confronted Zuma over his policy statements, the ANC leader continued to reassure business that



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nothing would change if he takes over next year."

There are growing signs that many in the rank and file of the SACP are becoming fed up with their leaders' prevarication and looking for an alternative policy. This is at the root of the debate in the SACP on whether to stand independently of the ANC in the next elections. Unfortunately, the leadership seems likely to win that debate.

Indeed what is urgently needed as

a beacon for the mass of poor people in South Africa is an alternative political party of the Left that would seem credible. But this cannot be left to the SACP. The social movements provide the first building blocks of such a party. But they tend to be localised and each focused around a limited range of issues.

To create a genuine mass alternative to the ANC, Cosatu needs to break with the Tripartite Alliance and build a workers' party on a socialist programme, linking up with the existing social movements. Only such a bold action can alter the justified cynicism in the social movements about political parties, reflected in the slogan 'No land, no house, no vote.'

Such a party should have a programme of reforms linking the existing struggles of the working class on such issues as jobs, housing, education, health and crime to the idea of transforming society as a whole through nationalising the big banks and monopolies under workers' control and management.

A workers' party would campaign for the creation of 1 million jobs now. It would organise defence of working people by working people against crime and xenophobic attacks. On workers' self-defence the programme advocated by the shack-dwellers movement in Durban, Abahlali baseMjondolo, shows the way.

Such a programme would attract not just organised workers, but could attract support from the unemployed, women at home, youth and even the middle class. The middle class is also oppressed by the banks, which in South Africa earn amongst the highest profits in the world.

The programme should be internationalist, declaring that

socialism could not be achieved in any single country on its own, but that the struggle for a democratic workers' state in each country is its precondition. The principal activity of such a party would be mobilising mass action, with electoral politics as a secondary weapon used to expose the bankruptcy of the rubber-stamp and impotent bourgeois parliament. (This is not to deny the many positive aspects of the Constitution, which would be preserved and developed by a democratic workers' state.)

This is what all militants in Cosatu and the SACP should be striving for.

LIMITATIONS OF COSATU APPROACH

It is not enough for Cosatu to run 'campaigns' in an attempt to maintain the support of the poor. In the Western Cape recently, Cosatu relaunched a campaign for jobs and against poverty, trying to involve social movements and NGOs. However on 1 April regional secretary, Tony Ehrenreich, sent around a letter on the campaign which stated at one point, "This joint campaign around the matters that affect our members and working class communities more generally *will feed into the election campaign.*" How does Ehrenreich expect social movements which are struggling *against* the ANC government and its policies to "feed into" a campaign to re-elect that same ANC government?

The way forward could be for Cosatu to form federal-type structures like those of the UDF in the 1980s on a "come one, come all" basis to take up the social questions. This would require the revival of Cosatu locals, the adoption of real mass action campaigns (and not just pickets of parliament).



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The root of Cosatu and the SACP's support for Zuma lies in the two stage theory – the ANC needs to lead the "first stage" of the national democratic revolution.

Cosatu shop stewards must re-awake to their responsibilities, which are not just to attend joint shop stewards councils, but to translate the discussions of those councils to those that they represent, and to take the lead in forming locals and mobilising them in action campaigns.

Of course, the reason that Cosatu and SACP leaders cling to the Tripartite Alliance is the so-called 'two stage' theory which proclaims that there must be a national democratic revolution separate from, and prior to, a 'socialist revolution'. This, for them, means that the ANC needs to lead the 'first stage', the 'national democratic revolution'. For this they wrongly claim the authority of Lenin. This is at the root of their blind support for Zuma and obsession with the leadership of the nationalist movement when they should be concentrating on the building of working-class leadership.

The idea that the 'two' or even a 'three' stage theory should require communist parties to subordinate themselves to nationalist organisations in the colonial world was introduced as pseudo-Marxist theory by Stalin, in China in the 1920s. The consequence was that

thousands of communists were slaughtered by nationalist leader Chiang-Kai Shek in Shanghai in 1927.

Similar tragedies have befallen communist parties since, as the result of the same mistaken policies of propping up bourgeois regimes in the name of the two-stage theory in Indonesia in the 1950s, and in Chile in the 1970s, for example. Moreover there is no case in the world of a 'two-stage' revolution leading to the achievement of a working-class state, a precondition for socialism.

The complete abandonment of the 'two-stage' theory in our country would unstick the glue that holds the Tripartite Alliance together. This does not mean abandoning the fight against national oppression and for democracy, but of recognising that these can only be fully achieved when the working class ends capitalism. This would open the way to a credible politics of a strong and unified Left.

CONCLUSION

The Mbeki government is, by now, completely discredited. Sixteen of his Cabinet, some 60%, did not survive onto the new national executive at Polokwane. The

country is leaderless, with Mbeki terrified of visiting even one site of the recent violence. But the Left should not place its hopes in a Zuma government. The continuation of the present policies will only draw out the agony and suffering of the masses, leading to worse frustration and desperation.

Let us heed what people told Zuma when he spoke on the weekend of 24-5 May in a township outside Springs: "If you are a stumbling block to us, we will kick you out." The audience was furious at being used as voting fodder by the ANC, served up with promises, without any implementation.

At the root of crime and xenophobia is mass unemployment, higher than any country in the world. Even when our economy was growing at 5%, not enough jobs were being created. Now world conditions, rising interest rates and rising inflation threaten to push our economy into recession. Unfortunately, unless leadership on the Left acts promptly with boldness and courage, then the xenophobic violence we have seen in recent weeks will seem like a tea party compared with the horrors that will rise in our country.

But, with boldness, it is entirely possible to avert these horrors. LB

Martin Legassick is a retired professor from the University of the Western Cape and an activist with the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign. He is author of 'Towards Socialist Democracy' where many of these ideas are further explored. He dedicates this article to a National Union of Metalworkers shop steward Walter Ntombela, a Mozambican 'migrant worker' who was murdered in the xenophobic violence in May this year.