

The state of the left in South Africa

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I would have liked to start with the objective conditions, which are very favourable for social change. But there is no time for that. Instead I ask: what is the state of the left? The real question of course is not the state of the left but state of the working class. The only real force for change – for ending capitalism and establishing socialism -- is a united and conscious working class – by which I mean everyone who does not control the means of production, not just employed workers – ie workers' families, the unemployed, youth and pensioners, urban and rural.

Since the 1980s, the level of consciousness in the working class has been driven back – by the propaganda for neo-liberal capitalism churned out daily. Today in the working class there are manifestations of xenophobia. In the Western Cape Coloureds are turned against African. No doubt it is the same with Indians in Kwa-Zulu Natal. In the Eastern Cape, I am told, older workers are sacked by the bosses to bring in young workers with no knowledge of trade unionism.

The task of the left is to assist in bringing about a united and conscious working class – not by preaching as a vanguard of intellectuals, but by joining in struggles and seeking to broaden and develop them.

Who is the left?

Can the South African Communist Party be regarded as of the “left” when its two most prominent leaders form part of a government that is still functioning with policies of neo-liberalism. And when some of its socialist left-wing has been purged, and others in the rank and file who may disagree with the Nzimande-Cronin line are too frightened to speak out. I myself no longer regard the SACP as part of the left.

Trade unions

COSATU, though still within the Tripartite Alliance, should still be seen as part of the left. Even its leaders are still trying to press a more left economic policy on the government and are deeply divided about whether to continue support Zuma for a second term. As the *Mail and Guardian* reported (1-7/7/2011) there are “sharp divisions” between a faction headed by Vavi which is critical of the government’s so-called “new growth path” (in which very little is new) and a faction headed by Nzimande which supports the new growth path and which supports Zuma for a second term in office. “We can’t change leaders like handkerchiefs” says Nzimande. (*Mail and Guardian*, 8-14/7/2011). He is supported by COSATU president Sdumo Dlamini, by NEHAWU, and parts of NUM and SADTU. Vavi is supported by SAMWU, by Irvin Jim, NUMSA general secretary, by the deputy general secretary of NUM and the president of SADTU. The Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing Wood and Allied Workers Union, the South African National Defence Union, and the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union are also said to be unhappy with Zuma. On the last day of COSATU’s recent central committee meeting a resolution on the national democratic resolution was postponed.

It is argued that those still supporting Zuma want to try to use his vulnerability to push the ANC into accepting that the Alliance, rather than the ANC itself, must be the strategic centre of power – but it is a utopian dream to believe that the ANC will accept this in practice.

Comment [BA1]: I would put it differently because its base in working class communities and in the labour movement continues to shape the SACP and position itself in a schizo way: statist and right social democracy and towards working class movements.

Meanwhile, as with last year's public sector strike, organized workers are again demonstrating their power. This time it's in the private sector – metals and engineering workers, petrol tanker drivers, and so on. I was on NUMSA pickets: they were very militant, and still singing socialist songs. FAWU is also on strike and SAMWU is contemplating strike action. There is a desperate need for COSATU to mobilize its announced living wage campaign around a call for a general strike.

Social movements.

The political vacuum to the left of the ANC since 1994 was in the early 2000s partly filled by social movements. One of the first of these was the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), which chose to work within the framework of the Alliance.

Recently it has spawned several clones – the Social Justice Coalition, set up to fight xenophobia but now agitating for toilets in the townships, Equal Education, agitating for each school to have a library and other basic resources. These bodies refuse to discuss capitalism, and are social-democratic in ideology. They are so well-funded and have so many employees that it might be debated whether or not they are NGOs which mobilize people rather than community-based social movements. They have the resources to transport thousands to their marches, and to produce placards all in the same handwriting (as a *Mail and Guardian* reporter noted recently: 6-12/5/2011).

Other social movements launched from 2000 include, in Gauteng the Anti-Privatisation Forum, with a powerful affiliate the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee; in Durban, resistance against evictions in the township of Chatsworth led to the formation of civic groups in other townships and to the formation of the Concerned Citizens Forum; in Cape Town the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign; as well as the Landless People's Movement. Perhaps the high point of the social movements was the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Sandton in August 2002, when twenty thousand people mobilised by the social movements marched twelve kilometres from Alexandra to Sandton. The ANC, COSATU and the SACP, supported by the South African Council of Churches could attract only 5 000 to the soccer stadium in Alexandra to hear President Mbeki speak. When the Civil Society Forum attempted to march to Sandton, only 1 000 left the stadium. Since then the fragility of social movements has been exposed. While some have developed – notably perhaps Abahlali baseMjondolo in Kwazulu Natal – others have virtually imploded. Recently, for example, this was the case with the Anti-Privatisation Forum.

Why is this? Some have argued it is because the social movements have been single-issue movements and also confined to one community apiece. Neither is really true. The Mandela Park Anti-Eviction Campaign, which started around 2000 by opposing evictions took on the question of demanding a R10 flat rate service charge, as well as the organisation of schools, clinics, social grants and cultural events for the community. In 2005 it took on a struggle over allocation of new housing in the area. This has been the experience of other sections of the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC) as well. In 2005 the Western Cape AEC acted as the fulcrum for organising marches, rallies etc. to press forward the demands of shack areas for delivery of toilets, taps, land, and housing, and for dropping charges against protesters.¹ In other words, once people become organised and move into struggle, *all* the problems that they face come onto the agenda. No doubt other examples could be

¹ See M. Legassick, "Mandela Park Anti-Eviction Campaign and the Housing Crisis: old demands, new challenges", (Centre for Civil Society Research Report, unpublished, October 2006)

given.

Nor have they been confined to one community. The Western Cape AEC, Abahlali in KZN and in the Western Cape, have spread themselves to numbers of communities. Most social movements recognize the importance of unifying communities: unity gives strength. However each social movement tends to see itself as the focus for that unity. Thus in the Western Cape there is Abahlali, the AEC, the Informal Settlement Network (sponsored by Shackdwellers International and with strong support in the Joe Slovo informal settlement in Langa), Informal Settlements in Struggle (its core in ZilleRaine heights) also seeking to unite housing struggles. An important initiative which to a certain extent transcends this has been the formation of a coalition including Abahlali, the AEC, Mandela Park backyarders, ZilleRain informal settlement, and community-based organizations in Manenberg, Tafelsig, and other “coloured” townships. This was stimulated by the Tafelsig land occupation in May and is still recent and trying to find its feet.

At the outset, social movements prided themselves on their “horizontal” structures and democratic practices – on regular holding of mass meetings etc. However my experience has been that each social movement tends to revolve around a core of leaders, with usually one predominant. Over time this can lead to the abandonment of democracy, and to dissatisfaction and splits. The social movements have also suffered from a lack of resources. Moreover, when they get them, their leaders find it difficult to handle them. Endless squabbles can develop with accusations of mismanagement. In general, there is a lack of financial accountability.

By and large the social movements have been hostile to COSATU, because of its participation in the Tripartite Alliance. COSATU itself blows hot and cold on the social movements. Western Cape COSATU supported the Joe Slovo informal settlement in their challenging the eviction order pursued by Lindiwe Sisulu against them – but on the whole has favoured social movements which do not challenge the ANC. An encouraging development late last year – cut across by election campaigning – was COSATU’s calling of a civil society conference and excluding the SACP and the ANC from it. It is yet to be seen what if anything will develop from this.

A recent body which has managed to mobilize a number of community-based social movements, at least in the Western Cape, is the Right to Know campaign – directed against the government’s legislation to prevent release of information, etc.

Political groups

There have been a number of political groupings to the left of the ANC, mainly Trotskyist. They have a terrible legacy of sectarianism – of dogmatism, and of splits.

Recently the Conference of the Democratic Left, now the Democratic Left Front (of which I am a member) tried to overcome this legacy, and has managed, in Gauteng and the Western Cape – and, more recently, in the Eastern Cape and Kwazulu-Natal, to bring into a united front trade unions, community-based movements, issue-based movements, and political groupings. This has been no easy task and faces many challenges. One ideological achievement of the DLF has been to combine anti-capitalist and environmental concerns into a theory and practice of ecosocialism. In practical work we have been successful in solidarising with CSSAWU, organizing rural workers in the Western Cape, and with solidarising with the Mine-Line workers in Gauteng. We have also launched a newspaper, *Phakamani/Opstaan* at first in the Western Cape and now nationally.

Comment [BA2]: I think you should say more of the DLF re its novelty of bringing social movements and political currents together. How this creates the conditions for developing a new left politics which is more conscious of being less vanguardist and less bureaucratic while creating the difficulties of coherence and programmatic unity. Also perhaps you should say something of the DLF's attempt to bring the ecological crisis and environmental justice into its programmatic work. Also its attempt to reach out to groups that stood to the left of the Alliance in the elections, i.e. it is a beginning of regroupment and not the end. The rural struggles re land, farmworkers etc. should be mentioned.

However sectarianism still rears its ugly head. In the wake of the January conference of the DLF, the Revolutionary Marxist Group split quite unnecessarily from the DLF, and launched a scurrilous and false attack on it in the first issue of their newsletter.

Anarchism

A recent phenomenon has been the revival of anarchism. In many ways this is a healthy reaction against the bureaucratism of Social Democracy and Stalinism. Ironically, their unfortunate opposition to nationalization is identical to that of the South African Communist Party, which wants rather “socialization of the means of production”. (*Mail and Guardian*, 8-14/7/2011). In their utopian call for the abolition of the state they completely ignore Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, which argued for the establishment of a workers’ democratic state with the capacity to wither away (as the anarchists desire) through the four measures he proposed: officials to be paid no more than an average workers’ wage, be subject to recall, and be rotated, together with the abolition of a standing army. The text was directed both against the reformists and the anarchists.

Youth and students

Generally, students form an important component of the left, as do youth. However neither youth and students are very prominent in the left today. In part this results from neo-liberalism’s indoctrination of individualism, and in part because of the fatuous Malematisation of youth politics.

Conclusion

Looking to the future, the global crisis – particularly in North Africa, the Middle East and Europe is generating new struggles and movements. It has spread to sub-Saharan Africa, in particular Senegal, Burkina Fasso and now Malawi. These struggles and movements will continue to inspire movements around the world including in our country.

Secondly, the tensions in the Tripartite Alliance will open up spaces for new initiatives such as the COSATU-civil society one. This is where the Democratic Left Front’s seeking to regroup activist forces will be important. Already many struggles outside the labour movement are by DLF affiliates, or look to the DLF for support.

The critical task for the left will be to build solidarity with popular struggles and trade union struggles and, above all, to overcome the disunity which exists between trade unions and social movements.

Comment [BA3]: Before concluding it might be useful to say something of youth and student struggles. How these are generally at a low ebb which has consequences for the general state of the left. This also leads to the question of intellectuals and the role of academics. The intellectual left (at universities, NGOs etc. has never been weaker, more timid and opportunistic than currently.