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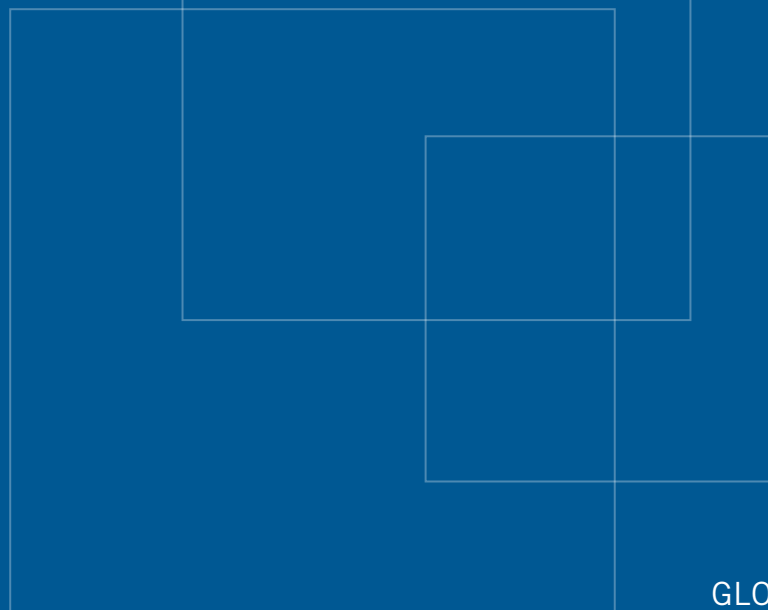
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Trade union revitalisation in South Africa: Green shoots or false dawns?

Devan Pillay



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Devan Pillay

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa a growing crisis of political legitimacy - given widening social inequality, high unemployment, persistent poverty, ecological devastation and increased corruption - has had a direct impact on the union movement. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's (NUMSA's) 2013 decision to break away from the alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and SA Communist Party (SACP), and build a broad united front and a 'movement for socialism', was momentous. Enthusiastic observers likened it to the 1973 'Durban moment', where a massive strike wave precipitated the re-emergence of independent, radical trade unionism in South Africa. This 'moment' was preceded by an equally significant yet under-appreciated 'moment' - the path-breaking work on climate change and renewable energy. NUMSA decided in 2013 to draw together a wide range of left movements and activists, and in that process debate the character and form of a new movement that would challenge the hegemony of the ANC and SACP, as well as provide a clearer leftwing alternative to the racial-populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Taken together, these two moments were hopeful expressions (or green shoots) of a new type of 21st century, democratic 'ecosocialist' working class politics. The subsequent launch of the SA Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) in April 2017 was meant to give this momentum a further boost. This paper argues that the promise of trade union revitalisation is fraught with difficulty. Indeed, as NUMSA retreats into its shell of 20th century orthodoxy, many fear that what seemed like green shoots of revitalisation were, in fact, false dawns.



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INTRODUCTION

Capitalism's growth crisis, and its attendant social crises (expanding inequality, unemployment, informalisation of labour, poverty, and slummification) is intertwined with a deepening ecological crisis that threaten the conditions of growth (manifested by declining resources, pollution and carbon emissions, and declining biodiversity) - encapsulated by the term 'fossil capitalism' (Altvater, 2007). The productivist certainties of the 20th century, based on GDP growth, are now increasingly questioned, as the industrial working class recedes as a central actor in 'working class' politics.

Trade unions world-wide face a crisis of relevance as they try to comprehend these changing realities, often resorting to defensive strategies to protect their hard-won victories within the core or formal sector of the economy. Increasingly, working class struggles occur outside the workplace, as working class communities grapple with the various manifestations of accumulation by dispossession – of land and other public goods (Bieler et al, 2008). If unions have, in general, failed to address social issues outside the workplace in recent decades, they have even more so failed to take the ecological crisis seriously (Rathzel and Uzzell, 2013).

Few unions can claim to have seriously developed a new politics that grapples with issues of top-down, patriarchal forms of organisation, and forges broad counter-hegemonic alliances which question economic growth paradigms that threaten the survival of the planet as we know it. The challenge is to re-embed the economy into society and the natural environment, either in the form of 'decent' green capitalism (or a Green New Deal), as some labour-friendly scholars argue (Dullien et al, 2011), or to transcend fossil capitalism (Foster, 2009). The combination of internal democracy, union independence, a broadened scope and alliances with other social movements to tackle issues within the workplace as well as the broader community was termed 'social movement unionism' during the 1980s. The revitalisation of trade unions in the 21st century entails reviving social movement unionism – but with an explicit green agenda.

The 2012-13 ecological and political moments of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) represented for many such a hopeful revitalisation of trade unions in South Africa. This article discusses the prospects and challenges of trade union revitalisation within the context of increased instability within the ruling Alliance, and increased union fragmentation. It revisits those moments promising a green social movement unionism (or an 'ecosocialist' working class politics)¹, and asks whether they were real shifts or false dawns? To assess this it is necessary to first briefly delve into history.

¹ This revisit draws from two recent articles by the author on the labour movement and the Numsa moments published in the *New South African Review 5* (Wits University Press, 2015) and in *Cosatu in Crisis* (FES/KMM, 2015).

1. THE RISE AND DECLINE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM²

The 1985-87 strategic compromise between the independent unions, led by the Federation of SA Trade Unions (FOSATU), and the political or community unions (aligned to the ANC and the United Democratic Front (UDF)), was a major breakthrough for workers' unity (despite the failure to draw in the black consciousness/Africanist unions, which went on to form the much smaller National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) in 1986). However, it arguably also undermined the initial radical vision of democratic workers' control of trade unions as well as of society in general (as expressed by activist academic Rick Turner in his highly influential pamphlet *The Eye of the Needle* (1972)).

This 'popular-democratic' synthesis connected workplace politics and broader community or state-power politics, and was meant to transcend narrow 'workerism', at one extreme, and overly broad 'populism' at the other extreme³. There were two types of 'workerism': firstly, a very narrow 'economism' (an exclusive focus on the workplace), and secondly a slightly broader 'syndicalism' (where trade unions act politically, but to the near exclusion of alliances with community and political organisations). At the same time, the 'populist' over-emphasis on broader nationalist struggles to the neglect of workplace organisation, was meant to be limited by the unions' insistence on their independence from political actors, and the prioritisation of working class issues – principles that became the cornerstone of COSATU. This combination, in theory, envisaged the working class leading the anti-apartheid struggle for state power – a form of anti-systemic social movement unionism. In reality it was not so simple.

The 1990 unbanning of the ANC and SACP saw them become the dominant political force within the country, and in the process formally drawing COSATU into a tripartite Alliance (a process that began in 1985). The federation found itself caught between, on the one hand, a robust and independent social movement unionism and, on the other hand, a subdued and compromised political unionism (where unions become subordinated to a political party). Although increasing inequality and unemployment ensured that workers agitated for a greater share in the spoils of democracy, COSATU at the same time subordinated itself to the ruling party, particularly during election periods. It also became enmeshed in institutionalised forums of corporatist decision making at industry, regional and national levels. While participation in the ruling party and forums brought real benefits (Webster and Sikwebu, 2009), in a context of South Africa's modest union density of approximately 30 per cent (as opposed to up to 80 per cent over the

² This history and the conceptual distinctions are discussed in more detail in Pillay (2011) and Pillay (2013b).

³ Workerism, economism, syndicalism and populism were labels that were used by protagonists in fierce debates within the union movement during the 1980s. They were often used in misleading ways that caricatured the actual practice of unions. Nevertheless, the terms are used here as 'ideal types'.

past century in Sweden, the model of successful corporatism), this focus arguably turned attention away from building the union movement.

Despite continuously resolving over the past two decades to recruit more members – both formal and informal workers – as well as to rebuild its relationship with other organisations fighting broader working-class issues, COSATU fell far short of its target of four million members by 2015. Before NUMSA was expelled in 2014 the federation claimed a membership of less than 2 million workers. NUMSA took with it around 340.000 members (while the NUM lost about 50.000 workers to AMCU). None of the unions made any inroads into the organisation of informal or precarious workers (apart from perhaps the SA Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (SACCAWU), which organised some part-time and temporary workers in supermarkets).

While COSATU at times reached out to other sections of society, these were in part constrained by its alliance with the ruling party. Its strikes over wage demands remain inwardly focussed and rarely elicit support from communities. The Marikana tragedy (see later) revealed the social distance between union leaders and members, which occurs across the union movement. This has led some labour activists to abandon hope in union revitalisation and start afresh with advice offices in the industrial heartland of the East Rand, given the failure of unions to adequately service their members, let alone service the needs of the unorganised. The Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO), along with other advice offices, won a major victory in September 2016, when the Labour Court granted non-unionised workers and advice offices representation at the Centre for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CWAO, 2016). The fact that workers are flocking to these advice offices speaks volumes about the state of the labour movement today.

Nevertheless, under Vavi's leadership, the federation did try to broaden its understanding of environmental issues and food security, and lay the basis for a return to a more robust social movement unionism. Vavi and affiliates such as NUMSA were highly critical of government's continued adherence to a 'neoliberal' or orthodox macro-economic framework, as well as threats to civil liberties and increased corruption. While there is some debate around whether government policy over the past decade or so has been narrowly 'neoliberal', given its limited social welfare programmes, its practice is a far cry from its ideological discourse around planning, an efficient developmental state and green economic development (Satgar, 2014). This has led to declining public support, and increasing tensions within the ruling party and the ruling alliance, with the real possibility that the ANC will split down the middle after its December 2017 conference.

2. THE POLITICAL CRISIS

The fracturing of the labour movement comes at a time when the entire political edifice of South Africa is beginning to crumble and re-compose itself. Following its 62% majority vote in the 2014 national elections, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and its allies the SACP and COSATU boldly asserted that this re-confirmed the overwhelming popularity of the national liberation movement, and endorsed its current leader, Jacob Zuma. Since then the ANC received a massive shock in the 2016 municipal elections, with a reduced national majority, and the loss of key urban centres to the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) (supported by the EFF led by the charismatic former ANC Youth League (ANCYL) president Julius Malema).

A key issue is rising social inequality and widespread poverty, with a new black elite joining the ranks of the established white elite, leaving the increasingly indebted working poor and unemployed struggling to make ends meet. It is this that provoked mineworkers in the platinum sector to go on strike in 2012, demanding a living wage – which tragically ended in the police massacre of thirty-four mineworkers at Marikana. The Marikana massacre saw a major split in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), hitherto COSATU's largest affiliate, as the breakaway Amalgamated Mining and Construction Union (AMCU) recruited thousands of its members (Sinwell and Mbatha, 2017). Marikana also played a part in the rise of the EFF, and the eventual alienation of NUMSA from the ANC. Increasing corruption compounds the problem of disillusionment, with a president overtly engaging in dubious practices, such as spending around R240m on 'security' upgrades at his rural Nkandla residence. Reports of severe corruption in all spheres of government and the public service since Zuma became president are now daily news (see the 2016 *State of Capture* report by the Public Protector, which focussed on the Gupta family from India, and its penetration of a wide range of state entities and government ministries).

Matters came to a head in November 2016, when the National Executive Committee of the ANC engaged in a three day debate on whether to remove the president from office. Zuma survived the debate, but it revealed how deeply the ruling party, and cabinet ministers, were divided. In August 2017 a parliamentary vote of no confidence in the president was narrowly defeated, with as many as 40 ANC MPs voting for the motion. Since then a new book, *The President's Keepers*, written by investigative journalist Jacques Pauw, has been published which claims that Zuma has had direct links with known gangsters engaged in the illegal sale of tobacco, the proceeds of which have been used to partially fund the election campaign of Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, the president's ex-wife (*Sunday Times* 29/10/17). Zuma publicly endorsed her as the next ANC president, ahead of the December 2017 national congress. Zuma will step down as ANC president then, and president of the country in 2019, when national elections are scheduled (unless he resigns early as a result of mounting public pressure).

Zuma came to power after Thabo Mbeki was ousted as president of the ANC in 2007, and of country in 2008, for being part of the '1996 neoliberal class project', and allowing black economic empowerment (BEE) to degenerate into the 'black elite enrichment' of a few connected individuals. This charge was levelled by the ANCYL, COSATU and the SACP, led by the now disaffected Malema, Vavi and Blade Nzimande respectively. As predicted by left critics, the Zuma administration has done little to move SA off this pathway. Instead, it is using the rhetoric of 'white monopoly capitalism' and 'radical economic transformation' to try and disguise the rampant looting of state coffers throughout the country.

Since 2008 the ruling alliance has fractured a number of times. The formation of the Congress of the People (COPE) in that year, led by former ANC chairman Patrick Lekota and former COSATU president Sam Shilowa, showed initial promise, but then imploded through internal squabbles. The next significant breakaway was that of the EFF in 2013, which won 1.17 million (or 6.35 per cent) of the votes in the 2014 national elections (but failed to make further inroads in the 2016 municipal elections). More recently the SACP has voiced increased concerns about the leadership of president Zuma, and finds itself on the side of Finance minister Pravin Gordhan in his battles against the Gupta family and its political allies, which include the ANC Women's League, the ANCYL, the MK Veterans Association and the so-called 'premier league' (consisting of premiers in provinces such as Mpumalanga, North-West and the Free State, as well as KwaZulu-Natal). All of these formations are fierce Zuma/Gupta supporters, which the EFF has labelled the '*Zuptas*'.

For the labour movement, the most significant breakaway has been that of NUMSA. It took a momentous decision in December 2013 to leave the ANC-Alliance and work towards setting up a United Front of progressive organisations, as well as a 'movement for socialism'. The optimistic view is that this represented a return to the 'social movement union' roots of NUMSA, where in the 1980s, as the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), it led the argument for an independent but politically engaged labour movement uncontaminated by the nationalist politics of the dominant liberation movements (see later).

To some extent, there has been a revival of the debate of the 1980s between the left in FOSATU, who favoured an independent union-led political strategy either directly through unions or through a working class party, and the SACP-aligned left within the UDF, which sought working class hegemony through the tripartite Alliance led by the ANC. The leading affiliate in FOSATU back then was MAWU, which became the core of NUMSA by the time of COSATU's launch in 1985. MAWU and allied unions had a diverse intellectual lineage, drawing inspiration from, among others, the democratic Marxism of Rick Turner and Antonio Gramsci (Forrest 2011), as opposed to the more rigid and dogmatic 'Marxist-Leninism' of the SACP.

For many on the independent left, the 2013 NUMSA breakaway the Alliance was a hopeful sign that at last the scales were falling from the eyes of large sections of the working class, as they saw that the ANC/SACP emperor had no clothes. The

promise of NUMSA's broad United Front, and its 'movement for socialism', came on the heels of an exciting break with 'fossilised' development paradigms, and a serious consideration of alternatives that suggested a new, eco-socialist working class politics. This had the potential of moving the union out of its traditional concentration on workplace bargaining issues, and its assumptions about fossil fuel growth paths, towards a broader focus on arguably *the* major issue facing capitalism: the natural limits to growth

3. AN ECOSOCIALIST, WORKING CLASS POLITICS?

Given the enormous challenges of ecological destruction and social inequality in the world, a radical vision is necessary. Bolivia's indigenous president Evo Morales, first elected in 2006 through an alliance between urban-based trade unions and indigenous rural communities, was re-elected in 2014 with another healthy majority. He offers this inspiring vision of *buen vivir* (living well):

"For us, what has failed is the model of "living better" (than others), of unlimited development, industrialisation without frontiers, of modernity that deprecates history, of increasing accumulation of goods at the expense of others and nature. For that reason we promote the idea of Living Well, in harmony with other human beings and with our Mother Earth" (Morales, 2009)

While in recent years the ecological left has been dismayed by what seems to be the retreat into 'neo-extractivism' in Bolivia and elsewhere (see Boron, 2012), the *idea* of *buen vivir*, and the granting of the earth constitutional rights, remains inspirational. These sentiments have encouraged a growing movement within the developed countries, around the concept of 'degrowth'. This builds on the ideas of the French Marxist Andre Gorz, who in the 1970s and 1980s made a forceful argument about the need for reduced working time, if we are to address the problem of unemployment, and reduce unnecessary consumption. The degrowth paradigm that has emerged in recent years, mainly within what is referred to as the 'over-developed' world, explicitly embraces the 'utopian' thinking of *buen vivir*, *ubuntu* and Buddhist economics, and some variants also include ecological Marxist thinking. In recent years this movement has, however, recognised that there still needs to be economic growth in the south – but balanced, ecologically sensitive growth that does not 'carbon copy' the tragedies of western development trajectories (D'Alisa et al, 2015).

A key challenge facing new movements which bring to the fore new visionary leadership, is George Orwell's *Animal Farm* effect – the tendency of leaders behaving like the elites they replaced. This often includes becoming co-opted into the dominant paradigm, but retaining the revolutionary discourse that brought them to power. This tendency is magnified by the adage that 'power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely' - which is why the lessons of 20th century "dictatorships of the proletariat" common to Marxist-Leninist regimes

need to be learnt, as Joe Slovo himself warned in his seminal 1990 pamphlet *Has Socialism Failed?* This is a fate that has befallen most liberation movements throughout the past century, whether nationalist or 'Marxist-Leninist'.

Amongst others Gandhi and the feminist movement warned that activists must *be* the change they want to see, if true radical transformation is to be achieved. Drawing on the thinking of the ancients, this involves personal transformation and continuous introspection, as well as a deep participatory politics, where leaders are always held accountable to their organisations, members and communities.

As the Bolivian case reminds us, Turner's utopian vision is different to a utopian politics that under-estimates power relations, and the need to navigate choppy waters that involve both struggle and negotiation, and inevitably compromises. A utopian imagination, as Boron (2012) argues, has to be one of real utopias, that seek out the possible, but do not fall victim to *possiblism* (there is no alternative); that has a utopian vision, but is not blinded by *utopianism* (living in a dream world). It seeks short term tactical victories that are embedded in longer term strategic visions that can only be guaranteed by a fundamentally democratic project, where power truly resides with the people.

The Democratic Left Front (DLF) at its launch in 2011 envisioned bold ecosocialist alternatives (DLF, 2011), but failed to establish itself within the labour movement. The Climate Jobs Campaign, launched in 2011, produced research findings indicating that jobs in renewable energy sectors (including the building of wind, wave tide and solar power, the renovation and insulation of homes and offices, and the provision of public transport) could create 3.7 million decent jobs based on the principles of ecological sustainability, social justice and state intervention (One Million Climate Jobs Campaign 2013: 13).

The Climate Jobs Campaign is part of a global movement seeking to show how shifted priorities and political will can generate the ideas and resources necessary to create meaningful alternatives. The campaign however has not yet taken root in SA, partly because of the turmoil within the labour movement. Nevertheless, the 2013 COSATU policy paper on the environment raised critical issues regarding a just transition from the current economic paradigm to that of a low carbon economy, which was a major step forward. However, as Jacky Cock (2013) pointed out, labour was caught between a *reformist* position, which sought accommodation within the logic of green capitalism, market based solutions such as carbon trading, and technologies such as carbon capture and storage, and a *transformative* position, which stressed the need for a class analysis and the recognition that the capitalist system is at the heart of the crisis of climate change.

The most encouraging development occurred within NUMSA, which put forward an innovative transformative policy perspective around climate change in 2012. Back then it criticised the government's market-based proposals around renewable energy which give private companies (independent power producers)

the lead in providing alternatives such as 'onshore wind, concentrated solar thermal, solar photovoltaic, biomass, biomass, landfill gas and small hydro' (NUMSA 2012: 1). NUMSA's 'socially owned' alternative involved:

- public, community and collective ownership of land sites which can produce renewable energy;
- social ownership of utilities that generate, transmit and distribute energy;
- social ownership and control of the fossil fuel industry such as coal and synthetic fuel to harness their revenues and fund renewable alternatives;
- local content requirements in the building of a renewable energy manufacturing base, in order to create local jobs;
- the creation of municipal solar and wind parks;
- the use of workers' pension funds to finance socially-owned renewable companies;
- the promotion of gender equity at all levels of the occupational ladder in such companies; and
- the setting up of a network, in collaboration with local and international friends of Numsa, to monitor the bidding process around government tenders for the provision of renewable energy (NUMSA 2012).

In these proposals NUMSA made an implicit distinction between *social* ownership, which involves maximum democratic participation from below (by workers and citizens), and *state* ownership, which is bureaucratic control over public resources, increasingly within a framework of market principles where workers are exploited and domestic consumers fleeced in the interests of large corporations – as is the case of the state-owned power utility Eskom, and the Central Energy Fund (CEF). NUMSA's proposals give substance to its more general views on nationalisation where, in contrast to the state-controlled 'nationalisation' of the EFF (2013), it called for *worker-controlled* nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy (NUMSA 2013d).

In addition, there was growing convergence between the United Front and the South African Food Sovereignty Campaign. The UF actively supported the Hunger Tribunal in 2015 and the Drought Speak Out and Bread March in 2016, connecting the dots between the energy, climate and food crisis (see www.safsc.org.za).

4. LOST MOMENTS?

While COSATU has abandoned its ecological focus, does NUMSA still represent the best hope of the labour movement, to build an ecosocialist working class politics -- in conjunction with other social and ecological movements, locally and globally? Events over the past year have severely dampened such expectations. The declaration of the Workers' Summit in May 2016 to announce the launch of the process of a new federation surprisingly made no mention of ecological and gender issues.

However, buried in NUMSA's 2016 congress declaration are references to ecological alternatives. This includes its advice to the electricity state monopoly Eskom to "open up to alternative energy", its demand that the country "explore alternative sources of reewable enery (solar, wind, water), decrease reliance on coal, and reaffirm that the manufacturing and servicing of solar systems and power stations must be done locally", and a firm commitment to join NGOs like Section 27 to "campaign against nuclear power stations". The congress resolved to link struggles around climate change to the struggle against global capitalism, and to "find allies in that effort across the globe". It also re-affirmed its social movement union character by stressing that its "a union that links shopfloor struggles with community struggles" (NUMSA 2016a).

These resolutions, although not prominently featured, seem at face value to re-affirm previous commitments to social green economic objectives. However, according to a NUMSA insider, the social forces behind the 2012 ecological moment included a worker-based research and development group, a research and development programme, and an alliance building approach at local and international level. The latter led to the establishment of a broad-based Electricity Crisis Campaign in South Africa, and participation in an international union coalition, Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, and energy-related campaigns. According to this insider, "all these are gone. So how are the 2012 resolutions on climate change and renewable energy going to be taken forward, including the lines that pepper the terrible national congress declaration?"⁴

Clearly, a 'socially owned' and 'worker controlled' orientation, which is more in accordance with a bottom-up eco-socialist (or eco-Marxist) approach⁵, is contradicted by a 'Marxist-Leninism' that is normally associated with bureaucratic statism and productivism (or economic growth at all costs, including unsustainable environmental costs). The latter is the orientation of many of NUMSA's top leaders and key advisers, and has now become union policy.

The SACP-derived 'Marxist-Leninist' ideological discourse - within both COSATU and NUMSA - is a major departure from the heritage of the 1970s (indeed, key intellectuals of the independent Marxist tradition went on to join the ANC and/or

⁴ This informant was one of the key innovators behind the ecological moment.

⁵ This was intially promoted by the Democratic Left Front (DLF, 2011), a tiny group of activists that has failed to expand its support base into the unions.

the SACP, and some became wealthy businessmen – thus contributing to the retreat of independent Marxism into the academy, and as minority strands within the union movement).

The SACP's Marxist-Leninism is of the mechanical Stalinist lineage, given that throughout its history the party followed all the twists and turns of the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the publication of Joe Slovo's *Has Socialism Failed* in 1990, the SACP began to shed some of this baggage (Williams 2008). Intriguingly (and alarmingly for democratic Marxists), it seems that NUMSA has picked up some of this mechanical baggage⁶. The other Leninist heritage, Trotskyism, was tolerated for a time within the SACP during the 1990s and early 2000s, but has since been marginalised. It maintains a presence amongst small groups of activists, and completely dominates the ideological outlook of the tiny Workers and Socialist Party (WASP) (2013), which has its roots in the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC (historically aligned to the Militant Tendency in the UK) (see Leggassick 2007). The EFF (2013) has combined a professed allegiance to 'Marxist-Leninism' (derived from the SACP) with the theories of Frantz Fanon as well as the political practice of the assassinated socialist president of Burkino Faso, Thomas Sankara. Its militant black nationalist-socialist orientation is also influenced by the black consciousness leader Steve Biko. All of these currents feed into the discussion within the union movement.

With the exception of the more flexible 'eco-socialist' or democratic Marxist current, the dominant discourse and practice within the left remains mired in a narrow vanguardist interpretation of Lenin's notion of 'democratic-centralist' politics. As such these formations resemble old wine in new bottles. Nevertheless, despite its 'Marxist-Leninist' discourse, does NUMSA have the potential to revive its participatory democratic ethos and play a significant role in reinvigorating working-class politics in South Africa?

Indeed, some may argue that, in principle, there is no 'Chinese Wall' between a 'Marxist-Leninist' vanguard (as opposed to vanguardist) approach, and participatory democracy, as the example of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala indicates (see Williams 2008). In Kerala the CPI (M) played a pivotal role in instilling bottom-up participatory democracy, with impressive developmental results, particularly in health and education. However, this was one current within the CPI(M), and contested by the more orthodox, vanguardist current that had been dominant in the party elsewhere in India, such as Bengal state (where it lost power a few years back after ruling for 30 years, and in the process becoming a bureaucratic party mired in corruption and neglect of its working class and peasant base).

The Kerala example shows how a 'vanguard' can provide leadership from the centre, and be a catalyst for bottom-up democratic processes; in contrast to the vanguardist approach, which pays *lip service* to genuine participatory democracy,

⁶ According to a NUMSA insider, those behind the assertion of Marxist-Leninism are to the "right of the SACP", in terms of their adherence to the older, Stalinist orthodoxy.

and leads *exclusively* from the centre. In NUMSA it would seem that a vanguardist faction has won the day.

The unprecedented attack on so-called “middle class” Marxism at NUMSA’s 2016 congress, and the sidelining of key activists who championed that more open, democratic ethos, has severely undermined prospects of union and Left revitalisation. Those who led the participatory democratic, ecological moments were not given an opportunity to debate these ideological differences with the congress representatives. The leadership gave the line in its secretariat report, and the congress duly adopted it – thus severely undermining the union’s own impressive history as a democratic union that respected diversity of opinion, and robust internal debate. In this light, it seems doubtful whether the United Front, which accommodated a diverse range of left opinion, will be allowed to proceed as before.⁷

Despite these set-backs, the future of left revitalisation remains an open project globally and locally, given the crisis of fossil capitalism. A narrow, moribund 20th century ‘Marxist-Leninism’ has little appeal outside the Alliance and its off-shoots. A new federation will have to have a broader, more flexible approach if it is to succeed (recognising Slovo’s own warning in the late 1980s that, unlike a political party, a trade union, even if it has a broad socialist inclination, must of necessity accommodate a variety of political ideological outlooks – bound together by the principle of workers’ unity). Indeed, NUMSA itself declared in 2014 that any new federation must not be subordinated to any political party – presumably including a future union-initiated working class party. In addition, any new party that is ideologically rigid will fail to attract the intellectual and activist resources of the broader Left constituency, and build a viable alternative to the SACP. In addition, the union’s headline characterisation of the key enemy of the working class as “white monopoly capitalism”, as opposed to capitalism in general, and monopoly capitalism in particular, opens the door to uncomfortable alliances with the aspirant black bourgeoisie, where black capitalism (or indeed state-led black monopoly capitalism) becomes a solution (at least in the short to medium term). How else does one interpret this rather strange congress resolution:

“If the aspirant native African industrial capitalist class takes leadership of the mass discontent, then South Africa is likely to adopt the same trajectory as India in the 1970s, and posit an *authentic* nationalist solution” (emphasis added).

It then goes on to talk of the possibility of advancing to a “Socialist South Africa” in classical SACP two-stage speak. While no-one can seriously consider the possibility of an immediate socialist transition, the apparent ‘first stage’ coincides

⁷ According to an informant who attended the Numsa congress, a key union advisor was heard to dismiss Vavi as a ‘liberal’, while the latter was giving his address. It is believed that the secretariat report’s long and unprecedented defence of ‘Marxist-Leninism’ was a direct attack on Dinga Sikwebu, an independent Marxist with a long history in the union (and twice coming close to winning the general secretary position). Sikwebu played a central role in driving both NUMSA’s ecological moment, as well as the democratic process leading up to the 2013 NUMSA congress, and in driving the United Front. Having been gradually sidelined in the union, along with many officials seen to be close to him, Sikwebu is now on secondment.

exactly with the aspirations of the predatory nationalist elite, who use the same language of “white monopoly capitalism”⁸. While this formulation is presumably meant to try and capture the simultaneity of both class exploitation and racial oppression, its practical effect is to make the *racial composition of capital* the focal point, rather than capital itself. Is the union (unintentionally) heading towards the *racial-statist* transformation of the political economy - a road well travelled in most liberation struggles over the past century (especially if it links up with the more explicitly racial-statist EFF, as some leftists seem to advocate – seemingly wishing away Julius Malema’s own history of predatory behaviour while president of the ANCYL).

Of course, these potentially contradictory formulations represent objective tensions within the union movement, that will only be resolved in actual struggles on the ground. For optimists who attended the NUMSA congress, there is a “catchy 21st century melody somewhere within the raucus 19th/20th-century M-L music”.⁹ This captures the hopes of many on the left who are desperate for an alternative to the unpalatable choices of neoliberal capitalism, crony capitalism or authoritarian racial-statism (or ‘third world nationalism’). The catchy melody, however, may reside more in a hopeful imagination, than in the post-congress reality of NUMSA’s internal politics.

5. CONCLUSION

The labour movement is at a crossroads, as the country grapples with a major political crisis. The new federation SAFTU, initiated by NUMSA, under the leadership of former COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, includes many small unions that display the vibrancy and ethos of the internally democratic unionism of the 1970s. While the federation has only attracted one significant affiliate from COSATU, the Food and Allied Workers’ Union (FAWU), and failed to draw in the new mining union AMCU, it nevertheless has around 700.000 members (around half of which belong to NUMSA). Its intention is to grow to one million members by the end of 2017 (but membership figures were still being verified by the time of writing). COSATU membership figures are in dispute, but it probably has in the region of 1 - 1.3 million members. There a number of factors that contribute to the reluctance of affiliates to want to leave COSATU, despite their sympathies towards NUMSA. Part of this may be financial, and part political.

COSATU itself has grown more critical of president Zuma, and along with the SACP has finally called on him to resign. The SACP has also been under sustained attack by Zuma supporters in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga,

⁸ The predatory behaviour that occurs within government can also be found in trade unions, whose leaders have lifestyles are often far removed from that of their members (and contributes to the increasing oligarchy and social distance between leaders and led). A numbers of unions, including NUMSA, have investment companies with vested interests in the BEE accumulation process. This is an under-researched area that requires full investigation of the extent to which unions, beneath their fiery socialist rhetoric, have indulged in business unionism.

⁹ This is a view expressed by Patrick Bond in an email exchange on the Debate list, 17/12/16.

as they try to wrest full control of the ANC. Indeed, the increased political alienation of COSATU and the SACP from the ANC severely undercuts the reasons for the split in COSATU. It may also open up the possibility of forging a broader working class unity, as the COSATU's immersion into the ruling Alliance was always a key stumbling block. Much depends on the outcome of the ANC elections in December 2017. If Cyril Ramaphosa, the former unionist, becomes the new president, he is likely to draw COSATU and the SACP back into the fold.

The tragedy, however, is that the green shoots of an ecosocialist working class politics, planted within NUMSA and extended to COSATU, has been trampled upon. NUMSA was one of the few unions world-wide to take up the ecological challenge, through its 2012 proposals for a socially-owned renewable energy pathway. This opened up the possibilities of a new kind of working class politics.

For those with a closer understanding of the internal politics of the union, however, the innovative ecological and democratic Marxist thrust was not shared by the key leaders and their advisors in the union. They clung to the 20th century paradigm, under the banner of an unreconstructed 'Marxist-Leninism' derived from the SACP (in its more dogmatic form). This culminated in an extraordinary attack on these Marxist thinkers at NUMSA's December 2016 congress, publicly labelling them "middle class Marxists". Indeed, former NUMSA spokesperson Castro Ngobese, has declared that "the NUMSA Moment is lost"¹⁰.

While it, along with COSATU, has allowed these green shoots to wither, it can still be given life again, given the enduring crisis of fossil capitalism. The union still has within it a worker impulses that want to assert a democratic, ecosocialist working class politics - in conjunction with environmental justice and other social movements. While it may be a long way off, the seeds of broader worker unity, and the possibility of an imaginative ecosocialist working class politics, have been planted. As the crisis of fossil capitalism deepens, it will take both worker pressure from below, and a visionary leadership from above, to see these seeds sprout again into green shoots, both within South Africa and across the world. As the ITUC's Sharon Barrows said a few years back, "there are no jobs on a dead planet". The environmental crisis in general, and the climate crisis in particular, are working class issues of paramount importance.

¹⁰ Ngobese, who was dismissed by the union in September 2016, made this claim in a tweet before the NUMSA congress.

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