

Paper for the GLU conference September 2011

The ANC- Alliance and its Discontents:

Contesting the ‘National Democratic Revolution’ in the Zuma era

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Despite increasingly shrill public spats between Alliance partners since the 2009 elections, was John Kane-Berman, head of the South African Institute of Race Relations, correct to suggest that ‘staying in the alliance was the better strategy to push the political centre of gravity of the African National Congress (ANC) further to the left’ (*Business Day* 31/1/11)? Kane-Berman was lamenting the influence of the Congress of Trade Unions of South Africa (Cosatu) over impending labour legislation, but his fears chimed with broader concerns from within the business community regarding future economic policy. Government’s New Growth Path, launched in November 2010, suggests greater state intervention in the economy, and calls for the nationalisation of sectors of the economy are growing within the ANC.

Left critics, by contrast, argue that the Alliance, through its National Democratic Revolution (NDR) ideological discourse, fulfils an important legitimating function. It glues together disparate social classes under the hegemony of conservative class interests – a coalition of white and emerging comprador black capital (enmeshed in ever-expanding networks of patronage and corruption), and a professional black middle class that has done rather well out of this transition. In other words, the organized working class is being deceived – by their leadership also implicated in patronage politics - into supporting the ANC against its own class interests. They believe that the time has come to build a ‘Left Opposition’ outside the Alliance.

The Alliance left, however, insist that since Jacob Zuma assumed the leadership of the ANC at the December 2007 Polokwane conference, space has opened for further contestation within the ANC and government. To leave the Alliance and build a Left Opposition outside it would, on the one hand, abandon that space to predatory rightwing forces, and on the other, relegate the left to the political fringe, no more than what ANC general secretary and SA Communist Party (SACP) chairperson Gwede Mantashe calls a ‘debating society’.¹

Alliance supporters also argue that, despite slow progress towards reducing inequality and eradicating poverty, the Alliance remains essential to holding the centre together by preserving national coherence through an increasingly tension-ridden but nevertheless persistent ‘non-racial’ discourse, and preventing South Africa from splitting into a dangerously fractious contestation over resources. The working class understand that this is in their interests, and they are influencing their leadership in the unions and SACP, as much as leadership is influencing them.

In other words, despite its class biases and its acknowledged ‘sins of incumbency’, is the ANC-Alliance the only hope for putting the country onto an inclusive developmental path? Or, does there need to be greater political uncertainty, that is, credible electoral challenges from the Left (or, for liberal pluralists, from the Right as well) to prevent the ruling party from taking citizens for granted? Indeed, are the two mutually exclusive?

This chapter examines the state of the Alliance since the 2007 Polokwane National Congress of the ANC. It then considers the various events since the 2007 Polokwane conference that seemingly threaten the stability of the Alliance, a recent survey of Cosatu members’ political attitudes, and,

briefly, an attempt by ousted SACP officials and independent socialists to build an alternative pole of attraction outside the Alliance.

Between social movement and political unionism

After the Freedom Charter was revived in the 1980s, it became the guiding document of the United Democratic Front (UDF) - formed in 1983 as an ANC-supporting broad front inside the country. The revived non-racial union movement, particular those unions that formed the Federation of South African Trade Unions (Fosatu) in 1979, was initially cautious about its relationship with the ANC and SACP. It expressed strong reservations about being 'hijacked' by middle class 'populist' politicians, pointing to the experiences of other liberation struggles, as well as the subordination of Sactu to the ANC in the 1950s. Fosatu argued that Sactu's demise in the 1960s was due its leading organizers being detained, killed or sent into exile as a result of their immersion in ANC activities. Thus the federation wanted to build strong, durable mass organizations at the workplace before entering the dangerous terrain of state power politics. It flirted with a number of ideas which its ANC/UDF critics labelled 'workerist' or 'syndicalist' - namely forming its own working class party, or engaging with state power as an independent union formation, and entering into alliances with other groups entirely on its own terms. On this basis it (and the Western Cape-based General Workers' Union and Food and Canning Workers' Union)² refused to join the UDF in 1983 - unlike a new generation of smaller, explicitly pro-ANC 'community' unions led by the South African Allied Workers' Union (Pillay, 2008).

By 1984, as township rebellions spilled over into the workplace, pressure built up within Fosatu to become more involved in state-power politics. ANC sympathizers within Fosatu affiliates played a key role in mediating between the 'workerists' and 'populists' within the union movement (Naidoo, 2010). This led to the formation of Cosatu in 1985, bringing together Fosatu and its allies, the UDF unions, as well as the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM).³ As the largest affiliate of Cosatu, the NUM would go on to play a key role in championing the cause of the ANC within Cosatu, against more sceptical unions from the Fosatu tradition. Cyril Ramaphosa, the NUM general secretary, moved from black consciousness to embrace the ANC, and became part of its internal leadership group after the release of Govan Mbeki from prison in 1989 (Allen, 2003; Butler, 2007).

At its inception in 1985 Cosatu exemplified 'social movement unionism', where democratically organized workers engage in both 'production politics' at the workplace and the 'politics of state power'. Unlike a narrower form of 'syndicalism', this involved explicit alliances with movements and organizations outside the workplace, but under strict conditions of union independence based on shopfloor accountability. The 1987 adoption of the Freedom Charter as a 'stepping stone to socialism' by Cosatu further entrenched this 'strategic compromise', which recognized both the increasing popularity of the ANC-SACP alliance, as well as a strong belief in the independence of the labour movement (Naidoo, 2010). The idea was to combine the best of 'populism' (an emphasis on cross-class solidarity against the apartheid state) and 'workerism' (ensuring working class independence and democratic shop-floor accountability), such that the working class led the struggle against apartheid (Pillay, 2008).

Independent socialists who continued to be wary of the SACP for its 'Stalinist' history and subordination to the ANC's nationalism drew comfort from the fact that working class power was rising during the late 1980s. In effect, with the banning of the UDF in 1987, the labour movement took on the leadership role of the internal resistance movement (Naidoo, 2010). As long as this continued, the possibility of working class leadership of the anti-apartheid struggle was kept alive.

Cosatu, in its meetings with the ANC, SACP and Sactu in exile, stressed that it was an independent formation and not a transmission belt for the ANC. Along with the UDF, it had some influence on the relatively hierarchical ANC and SACP, helping to deepen the lessons learnt during the Gorbachev era about the failures of one-party state 'socialism', and a greater appreciation of the values of mass participatory democracy (Callinicos, 2004; Butler, 2007; Naidoo, 2010). As unionists and independent socialists joined the SACP in numbers after 1990, it showed signs that it was shedding its adherence to a Stalinised form of 'Marxism-Leninism'. The hope was raised that it could

become the non-dogmatic, independent, and counter-hegemonic mass workers' party many in Cosatu wished for. This promised, however, was largely unfulfilled (Williams, 2008).

Once the ANC and SACP were unbanned in 1990, the worst fears of 'workerists' seemed realized, as the ANC took over the leadership of the internal movement, and gradually reduced Cosatu to the role of one interest group among many. Ironically, many prominent 'workerists'⁴ went on to join the ANC in government and parliament, and some went further to become wealthy businessmen. Others, however, remained in the union movement to build on Cosatu's heritage as an embodiment of social movement unionism.

Since 1990, when the ANC and SACP dissolved Sactu and formally drew Cosatu into a triple alliance in pursuit of its the NDR, Cosatu drifted towards a narrower form of 'political unionism'⁵. While retaining its independence and its commitment to mass action where necessary, and continuing to engage in wide-ranging policy contestation inside and outside multi-party corporatist forums such as the National Economic, Development and Labour Council (Nedlac), Cosatu dared not push too far and forge links with movements outside the triple alliance. This was despite severe misgivings about government's adoption of the market-friendly, economically orthodox Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) policy in 1996 - particularly without first consulting the ANC or any of its alliance partners (Marais, 2011). The popularity of the ANC was by that stage too great, perhaps, for any alternative path to be feasible for Cosatu.

Although initially supportive of Gear, the SACP soon realized its full implications, and began to increasingly side with Cosatu against the ANC-government on policy matters (in particular macro-economic policy, HIV-Aids and Zimbabwe). This coincided with Cosatu's commitment to fund the SACP's salary and office expenses around the country, in the interests of furthering the working class struggle and building socialism within the womb of the NDR (Pillay, 2008).

The '1996 class project', as Cosatu and the SACP later termed it, meant that the ANC-in-government was captured by particular capitalist class interests, namely white monopoly capital and its black empowerment allies within the ANC. The ANC's professed bias towards the working class was displaced but remained at the level of rhetoric, in order to keep its left flank happy. This sore festered for 11 years, as the SACP and Cosatu diffused pressure from their own left to leave the Alliance, with the view that the ANC would lurch to the right if it did. Cosatu did help form the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) in 2000, with groups to the left of the ANC. However, the backlash from the ANC was so strong that it backed off, even to the point of kicking the APF out of its building in 2002. Cosatu also supported the dismissal of independent socialist John Appolis as regional secretary of the Chemical, Paper, Packaging, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (Ceppwawu), for daring to initiative a referendum amongst members on whether they wanted to be part of the Alliance or not (Pillay, 2006).

Cosatu was aware that any attempt to leave the Alliance would split the federation, and the SACP dared not test its support outside the protective cover of the ANC. Worker surveys conducted before every national election since 1994 pointed to overwhelming, if gradually declining, support for the Alliance (Buhlungu, 2006). A better strategy was to 'swell the ranks' of the ANC with working class members, who would re-shape policy and ensure pro-working class leaders were elected to high office within the party.

Indeed, from the low point of 2001, when Mbeki faced down the left after anti-privatisation strikes (amidst increasingly successful new social movement mobilisation), the ANC-Alliance left did re-group. It started to make in-roads into ANC policy, forcing it to increasingly describe itself as a 'social-democratic' party, and not a 'neoliberal' one (ANC Political Education Unit, 2002). The ANC also felt obliged to move into space occupied by new social movements, and stole much of their thunder by partially addressing community concerns around affordable water and electricity provision. The alleged 'victimisation' of deputy president Jacob Zuma, who was dismissed as the country's deputy president in 2005 and later charged with corruption, presented Cosatu and the SACP with an opportunity to shift the balance of forces in the ANC in their favour. When moves were afoot in 2005 to get the ANC to liberalise its labour market policies at its June policy conference, the left⁶ mobilized to defeat this proposal. Zuma supporters linked this to support for the ousted deputy president (who was re-affirmed as the ANC deputy president, thus defeating Mbeki's attempt to remove him from that position as well).

If in 2004 only 3% of Cosatu members felt that Zuma represented workers' interests (Buhlungu, 2006), by the time of the 2006 Cosatu congress Zuma had delegates eating out of his hand. Indeed, in 2005 Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi said that only a 'tsunami' could stop Zuma from becoming the country's next president. Vavi and SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande campaigned vigorously for Zuma amongst workers, and sidelined or purged activists who thought otherwise. A climate of fear fell over the working class movement, and few dared to publicly question the suitability of Zuma. Dismissing critics who queried in what way Zuma, a polygamist Zulu traditionalist charged with corruption in the notorious arms deal, could be seen to be on the left, Cosatu and SACP leaders insisted that Zuma would be more attentive to working class interests (Pillay, 2008).

The road from Polokwane

At Polokwane, the SACP/Cosatu strategy of 'swelling the ranks' of the ANC with working class members – in conjunction with support from the ANC Youth League, amongst others - paid off, as the Zuma slate received 60% of the vote compared to Mbeki's 40%. Resolutions taken at the conference seemed to confirm the drift towards a 'democratic developmental state' and away from neo-liberalism.

Nonetheless, this was not a decisive shift. Under Mbeki Gear's market fundamentalism was steadily being discarded for a more pragmatic policy approach that embraced the concept of an interventionist 'developmental state'.⁷ Polokwane may have given it added urgency. However, there was no overall commitment to move away from a conservative macro-economic policy stance (although Cosatu (2010a) continues to argue that this was strongly implied).

Where there seemed to be a decisive shift was a greater commitment to the Alliance, and indeed during 2008 the Alliance met regularly. There was increasing hope that it, and not the ANC, would become the 'political centre'. This, however, was rejected by the new ANC leadership⁸, which also assured the markets that macro-economic policy would not change significantly. Indeed, Zuma even hinted to the business world that there would be greater labour market flexibility, but was forced to retract after an outcry by Cosatu. This trend continued after the ousting of Mbeki as state president in September 2008, with Kgalema Motlanthe installed in his place until elections the following year (Marais, 2011).

Soon after the April 2009 elections, following which Zuma became President, and the appointment of SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande as Higher Education minister and his deputy Jeremy Cronin as deputy Minister of Transport, turbulence within the Alliance increased significantly. While government dared not talk about labour market flexibility, it became clear that macro-economic policy was not going to change, for the ANC was too beholden to the minerals-energy-financial complex and its perceived need to attract foreign investment (Mohamed, 2010).

Contestation from within

Cosatu soon realized that there was more continuity with the past than change (Cosatu, 2010a). Indeed, there were ominous signs of creeping social conservatism under Zuma (Butler, 2010), as well as threats to the liberal constitutional order (which Cosatu, in fighting Zuma's corner against corruption charges, assisted by casting doubt on the judicial system, and supporting the closure of the anti-corruption unit the Scorpions (Pillay, 2007)).

Cosatu, in its September 2010 analysis of the post-Polokwane era, identified three phases of its relationship with the ruling party. Firstly, there was the 'honeymoon' phase from December 2007 to mid-2009, when two 'successful' Alliance summits were held, the Alliance produced a 'progressive' election manifesto, Cosatu and the SACP were 'consulted' on the appointment of the new Cabinet and won the new post of Economic Development, to 'coordinate economic policy'. However, there were nevertheless 'clear signs that the old bureaucracy and leaders of the 96-class project' continued to hold sway in both the ANC and government (Cosatu, 2010a:20).

Secondly, there was the 'fight back and contestation' phase from mid-2009 to 2010, when soon after the national elections which brought Zuma to power, it became clear that conservative class forces were still ascendant in the ANC, particularly around macro-economic policy, and the ANC rejected calls for the Alliance to be the political centre. Thirdly, Cosatu identified the current

‘political paralysis’ phase, where the ANC allegedly refused to honour all the policy commitments made at Polokwane. For our purposes, the last two phases can be merged into one.

The August-September 2010 public sector strikes stretched tensions considerably. Cosatu embarked on an extended nation-wide strike that saw union members hurling insults at the president, questioning his sexual morality and his government’s perceived imperviousness to the pain of public sector workers. The strike followed the equally massive 2007 public sector strike, when Mbeki was still at the helm. The Zuma-led ANC promised, in its 2009 election manifesto, an expanded public sector, ‘improvements in working conditions and the provision of decent wages for workers’ (Hassen, 2010: 4). Instead, workers have seen high pay increases and excess amongst the elite. Rising inequality and the conspicuous consumptions of the old and new elite fuelled workers’ resolve to demand more out of a government that promised much, but only delivered an eroding real wage and high unemployment. Employed workers (particular black workers) have to clothe and feed an extended family that includes the large army of unemployed and under-employed.

Although the public potentially had much sympathy for the low pay of public sector workers – particularly health professionals and teachers – there was no attempt to build alliances between striking workers and poor communities. Instead, poor communities bore the brunt of the strike action through neglected essential services in hospitals and schools (particularly in townships). Public sector workers tended to give the impression that they were only interested in their own narrow wage and working conditions, and cared little about building a broader working class unity. This was an opportunity lost for Cosatu to re-ignite its social movement unionism, and build broader solidarity. Eventually, after three weeks of bitter industrial action, a settlement was reached, but not all workers were satisfied (Bekker and Van der Walt, 2010; Hassen, 2010; Ceruti, 2011). Whilst Cosatu’s South African Democratic Teachers’ Union (Sadtu) felt that it did not go far enough, Treasury feared the fiscal consequences of the settlement. Government felt that above-inflation increases should be linked to performance improvements within a public service not known for its efficiency. New rounds of discord between public sector workers and government are pencilled in for the future (Hassen, 2011a).

Cosatu and the ANC were eager to calm things down before the crucial National General Council (NGC) of the ANC in September 2010. By all accounts the NGC allowed diverse views to be aired, and the ANC came out of it relatively calm and focused (Turok, 2010a). The ANC once again showed its skill at orchestrating a wide range of discordant voices into one palatable tune, only for the fragile unity to unravel again soon afterwards. Of most concern to the ANC leadership is the issue of nationalisation, supported for different reasons and in different ways by both Cosatu and the ANC Youth League⁹. The League was particularly irked by the manner in which the issue was deflected into a two-year research investigation, and has since ensured that the issue remains on the public agenda.

In September 2010 Cosatu published its own redistributive economic policy proposals, which urged greater state intervention in the economy, in order to transform its industrial structure within the context of ‘sustainable development’ and regional integration (Cosatu, 2010b). These were meant to influence the final New Growth Path (NGP) eagerly awaited from the new ministry of Economic Development (amidst fears that this department was being sidelined in government, in preference to the more conservative Treasury).

When the NGP was finally released in November 2010, calling amongst other things for an incomes pact between business and labour, and greater attention to growing green jobs, it was received with a lukewarm response from Cosatu (although the SACP endorsed it as a good starting point, as it emphasized massive job creation and a greater seriousness about implementing an aggressive industrial policy (Cronin, 2011a))

Despite agreements within the ANC-Alliance not to criticize each other in public, there has been little resolve within the ruling party to take decisive action against powerful dissenters, notably Cosatu’s Zwelinizima Vavi. Indeed, Cosatu has won broader public support for its principled stance against corruption and the rise of a ‘predatory elite’ in the ANC, as well as threats to civil liberties protected under the Constitution.

Unlike the SACP, Cosatu added its voice to that of the media and groups like the Freedom of Expression Institute, the Right to Know campaign and SOS: Support Public Broadcasting, when

government was seen to meddle in the affairs of the SABC, to propose a Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT) and, most worryingly, to propose an Protection of Information Bill that threatened to restrict access to information deemed critical to the public interest. Ominous voices within the ANC, SACP and ANC Youth League seemed bent on muzzling the media and preventing ANC politicians from being publicly scrutinized. Legitimate concerns about media concentration and often poor reporting standards, raised by community media groups, were consequently drowned out in a climate of acrimony.

Eventually, after much public criticism, Zuma dismissed Simpiwe Nyanda as Communications minister. His replacement, Roy Padayachie, calmed fears that the SABC was about to lose its status as a public broadcaster, and become a state broadcaster (see Skinner in this volume). Hopes rose that the ANC would back down on the Information Bill, and the ANC allowed the media to investigate how it could beef up its own self-regulatory mechanisms before considering the MAT (see Duncan in this volume).

Cosatu's voice in all of this served to deflect accusations that it was only the white middle class that was opposed to the ANC's proposals. It re-affirmed its reputation as a defender of public rights and democratic freedoms. The SACP's Blade Nzimande, by contrast, spoke of the media as the 'greatest threat to democracy' (Grootes, 2010) and warned of journalists being imprisoned or heavily fined if found guilty by the proposed MAT for incorrect reporting - although his deputy Jeremy Cronin later re-affirmed the media's independence, and pointed to the limited intentions of the MAT proposal, which was not for a pre-publication but a post-publication *appeals* body. He stressed that it remained merely an ANC proposal, and not government policy (Cronin, 2011b).

Increasing SACP-Cosatu tensions

Cosatu's criticisms of the ANC and the SACP, alongside its explicit flirtation with organizations of civil society to the left of the ANC, suggested a return to a more robust, independent social movement unionism. This provoked an unprecedented backlash from its alliance partners, with the SACP for the first time openly criticizing Cosatu.

During 2010 Cosatu increasingly raised the question of Nzimande being in government (as Minister of Higher Education) and consequently neglecting his SACP duties. According to Vavi, Cosatu was unhappy about the SACP changing its constitution in 2009 to allow Nzimande to go into government while retaining his position as general secretary of the party (SABC News online, 1/5/11). At the Wits University Ruth First memorial lecture on 17 August 2010, Vavi, reflecting on the social crisis facing the country, declared that First would ask 'where her South African Communist Party is, and why it has not led a united working class in a struggle to change the direction we seem to be taking' (Vavi, 2010).

Later, Cosatu would more specifically call on Nzimande to leave government and focus on his SACP duties, even offering to pay him a minister's salary. This angered the party, which felt it was an insult to suggest that Nzimande was in government for the money, a sensitive point, given the outcry in 2009 when Nzimande was one of the ministers who spent R1.2 million on a top-of-the range German car.

By late 2010 it was speculated that Vavi himself, who had withdrawn an earlier commitment to leave Cosatu and avail himself for a top position in the ANC at its 2012 national conference, would instead offer himself for the leadership of the SACP (even though he has no profile within the party, and has not himself indicated any interest in becoming leader). This expressed a hope amongst some unionists and SACP members for a renewal of the SACP as a more robust champion of the working class capable of uniting the broad left.¹⁰

Cosatu, in conjunction with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and civil rights group Section 27, organized a civil society conference and did not invite its allies (except the South African National Civics Organisation) on the understanding that political parties were not part of 'civil society'. The ANC and SACP were furious. Gwede Mantashe warned Cosatu against working towards 'regime change', the ANC's National Working Committee accused the gathering of attempting 'to put a wedge between civil society formations, some unions, the ANC and its government' (Cosatu, 2010c), and the SACP's Jeremy Cronin (2010) suggested that Cosatu was falling into a 'liberal' trap to upset the NDR. Contrary to popular convention, Cronin defined 'civil

society' as including the corporate sector. From his perspective, civil society was suspect, a terrain of anti-state, pro-market liberalism. Because the conference made no reference to the NDR, he proceeded to portray it as 'anti-transformation'. While acknowledging that it would be 'crass' to suggest that those formations present at the conference were 'simply imperialist agents' or part of some 'major conspiracy', he warned Cosatu that 'we need to be very careful that we are not manipulated into someone else's strategic agenda, particularly when that agenda is itself increasingly hegemonised by a much more right-wing, anti-majoritarian liberalism' (Cronin, 2010).

These harsh criticisms were followed in January with a cutting admonition of Cosatu's criticism of government's New Growth Path. Cronin accused Cosatu of 'entirely missing the bigger picture', and having a 'redistributionist approach to transformation' which, he implied, did not ask 'what is right and wrong about our productive economy'. This 'paradigm shift', Cronin asserted, was implicit in the NGP's emphasis on job creation (2011a).

Cronin seemed to ignore Cosatu's substantial policy document on a new growth path, issued in September 2010. Far from being narrowly 'redistributionist', it is a far-reaching call for decisive intervention in the economy to steer it away from the minerals-energy-financial complex. These proposals were full endorsed by the civil society conference¹¹, underlining its deeply transformative, progressive agenda. Indeed, Cosatu's reservations about the New Growth Path were that it did not take on board Cosatu's proposals (Cosatu, 2011).

Vavi, in an address to Barometer SA in March 2011, argued for a 'radically different macroeconomic strategy, based, among others, on lower interest rates, a weaker rand, and more tariff protection for vulnerable industries identified by IPAP2¹² and NGP as potential job drivers'. He also underlined the need for a 'much bigger role to the state in directing investment into the sectors where jobs can be created', including using state-owned enterprises to create jobs (Vavi, 2011).

Cosatu is clearly of the view that the NGP has not shifted government away from a neo-liberal paradigm which contradicts the developmental goals set out in the NGP. Vavi asked: 'Even the most developed countries are now abandoning this pro-market approach and taking quite drastic action to try to discipline the private sector, particularly the banks. How much more do developing countries need to build a strong, dynamic, but also democratic public sector and developmental state to drive the agenda of the NGP?'

Cosatu did not attack minister Ebrahim Patel directly, not his ally the SACP's Rob Davies (the Minister of Trade and Industry and responsible for industrial policy). These two departments are clearly at odds with more conservative bureaucrats in Treasury, which has constrained their more heterodox economic perspectives within a macro-economic 'straight-jacket'. Cosatu was appreciative of the fact that the NGP did contain progressive proposals around job creation, and that Patel's department seemed to have won the battle to become the lead department in economic policy development. Its difference with the SACP seems to lie in whether to knock quietly on the door of opportunity, hoping it will open, or to knock loudly, even threatening to break the door down, knowing that there are many on the other side who would rather keep it closed.

Continued, but declining, support for the Alliance

Cosatu's support for the ANC during the 2011 municipal elections, even while it continued to criticise government policy, underlined its commitment to building the ANC-Alliance. It continues to believe in the strategy of 'swelling the ranks' of the ANC to ensure that in future it does elects leaders who truly have the interests of the working class at heart.

A survey¹³ of Cosatu members' political attitudes confirmed the continued, if gradually declining, popularity of the ANC and the Alliance amongst workers. Support still remains at 60% (down from 82% in 1994, 70% in 1998 and 66% in 2004). However, those who are now unhappy about the Alliance are more interested in Cosatu being non-aligned (21%), than being part of a new workers party (19%). Most members clearly have no appetite for breaking away from the party of Mandela, despite their unhappiness with aspects of the ANC's policies and performance (particularly around access to nutritional food (55%), higher wages (72%), land (59%), and jobs (72%)).

Interestingly, despite Cosatu's denunciation of the neo-liberal macro-economic framework Gear, most workers (75%) had never heard of it. Of those that did, only 40% believed it was achieving its goals of growth, employment and redistribution. However, only 45% believed that it

was not. Tellingly, 62% of the workers vote for the ANC because of its policies or past performance, while only 21% vote out of loyalty or because the union told them to (2%). Clearly, despite anger at government for not meeting many working class aspirations, for most workers this does not yet mean abandoning the ANC or the Alliance. If the ANC does not satisfy workers in future, only 6% are interested in forming an alternative workers' party (compared to 38% in 2004, and 33% in 1998). Workers prefer ongoing mass action or pressurizing unionists in parliament (62%). In other words, worker sentiments are not out of line with those of the union leadership. Working class aspirations, for most Cosatu members, must be fought for within the ANC and the Alliance, rather than outside it – and the post-Polokwane ANC appears more attentive to the working class. Nevertheless, while worker support for the ANC during the May 2011 municipal elections was largely uncontested outside the Western Cape, Cosatu's Vavi revealed that he had to campaign vigorously in Port Elizabeth to ensure that disillusioned workers came out to vote ANC.¹⁴

Is this the case of relative 'insiders' (organized workers) being comfortable with a liberation movement that has brought them some benefits (better housing (56%), access to clean water (81%), electricity (79%), a telephone (65%), better public transport (55%) better health care (53%), HIV-AIDS treatment (62%), education and training (62%) and a clean and healthy working and living environment (61%)? While the majority seem relatively satisfied, a sizeable minority are not. The unemployed and under-employed majority are likely to be much less satisfied, as rising 'service delivery' protests indicate.

Nevertheless, the ANC vote in 2009 increased from 10.9m in 2004 to 11.7m in 2009 (less than the 12.2m cast in 1994, but significant nonetheless) (Southall and Daniel, 2009). While much of this support came from organized workers, it is safe to assume that the 11.7m also included a large number of unorganised workers and the unemployed in urban and rural areas.

However, while voter support generally correlated with increased satisfaction regarding 'national economic' and 'overall conditions' (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2009:33), 6.8m of the 30m entitled to vote in 2009 did not register, while a further 5.3m who did register did not vote, making a grand total 12.1m voters (40.3% of eligible voters) who did not vote. This indicates significant alienation from the political process amongst a large section of the population who see little return from voting, particularly within the context of rising 'service delivery' protests. Indeed, while the percentage of *valid* votes for the ANC remained stable at 66%, the percentage of *eligible* voters voting for the ANC declined from 53.8% in 1994 to 38.8% in 2009 (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2009).

While the ANC's received 62% of all votes cast in the 2011 municipal elections, according to Hassen (2011b), using Statistics South Africa's 2010 Mid-Year Population Estimates, 15.6m eligible votes over 20 years of age did not vote, compared to the 13.7m voters that did. If 18-20 year olds are counted in, the 'silent majority' increases, indicating a significant and potentially increasing degree of voter alienation (taking into account that municipal elections normally attract lower voter turnouts).

Does this mixed picture nevertheless give hope to those seeking to build an alternative pole of attraction to that of the ANC?

Contestation from the outside

The formation of the Congress of the People (Cope) after the ousting of Thabo Mbeki as president in September 2008 raised expectations that ANC dominance would be challenged, and a realistic opposition would emerge. Cope was led by former ANC chairperson and UDF leader Mosiuoa Lekota as president, with former Cosatu general secretary and premier of the Gauteng province Sam Shilowa as vice-president. It scored 7% of the national vote in the 2009 elections, less than the 12-20% predicted before polling started, but a reasonable return for a party that was only a few months old.

However, severe internecine squabbles between Lekota and Shilowa factions hobbled the party. Repeated attempts in 2010 to hold a congress to resolve the leadership issue failed, leaving the party in complete disarray. In addition, attempts to form an alternative labour movement to Cosatu, led by former Cosatu president, Willie Madisha, proved moribund. By 2011, Cope was clearly not a viable alternative to the ANC-Alliance, and the party performed miserably in the municipal elections.

The 2010 public sector strikes, and Cosatu's flirtation with civil society groups, raised hopes amongst some that the labour federation might leave the Alliance earlier than expected. While that hope remains, it was too early for Cosatu to accept an invitation to attend the Democratic Left

conference in January 2011¹⁵, which launched the Democratic Left Front (DLF), a broad coalition of left formations representing small groups of community activists and intellectuals from around the country. Cosatu had just come out of an ugly spat with its Alliance partners over the civil society conference, and the DLF's intention to build an alternative left pole of attraction was too risky politically.¹⁶

The DLF includes NGOs and social movements that emerged in the late 1990s to fight water and electricity privatisation, home evictions, environmental degradation, lesbian and gay discrimination, amongst other social issues, as well as prominent individuals who had left the SACP¹⁷. It places emphasis on eco-socialism, participatory-democracy, feminism and gay rights, and a non-dogmatic approach to Marxism (DLF, 2011).

However, it is clear that any alternative to the Alliance is fraught with difficulty in the absence of a Cosatu breakaway. Whether Cosatu's membership will continue to offer support to the ANC-Alliance in the future depends mainly on whether it continues to see benefits accruing from an ANC government – mainly to itself as organized, employed workers in permanent jobs, but also to the larger working communities within which it lives.

Conclusion

Is this the same dance as always – fierce quarrels between the battered wife (Cosatu) and abusive husband (the ANC) only to be followed by reconciliation before the next flare-up? Can the battered wife ever leave her husband, despite neglect and abuse, as long as he periodically gives her flowers and a few trinkets? Does she dare blink at the new suitors in civil society, urging her to seek a divorce and ride into the sunset with them? What role does the SACP play in this *ménage à trois*? Is it the older first wife, deeply bonded to the marriage, and despite abuses from time to time, still intent on placating the ANC (and convincing the younger bride that things will get better)?

Whatever view is adopted, recent research amongst Cosatu members underlines the continued, if declining, popularity of the ANC and the Alliance. This seems to reinforce the view that the ANC knows that its partners will continue to line up behind it. However, the argument that this is due to the politics of patronage, whereby relatively privileged permanent workers organized into Cosatu benefit from being relative 'insiders' (Buhlungu, 2010), seems only partially true. Community uprisings involving marginalized, often unemployed residents against ANC councillors and the lack of 'service delivery' also do not seem, ultimately, to question the ANC's legitimacy.

The ANC-Alliance has a long history, which is cemented by a powerful NDR ideological discourse that secures its legitimacy amongst the working class. Like many other liberation movements, this has given the ANC almost mythical (and mystical) status akin to a religious authority. It is therefore no surprise that it believes that it will rule 'until Jesus returns'. In some senses, for many South Africans, the 'ANC' can do no wrong – only its leaders can fail the movement.

Nevertheless, unless liberation movements address challenges of under-development, they often start to lose their legitimacy after about 20 years in power, as the cases of India and Zimbabwe illustrate. However, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico absorbed the labour movement, and ruled (through corruption and authoritarian practices) for most of the 20th century. In a different context the Swedish Labour Party, in close alliance with the labour movement, ruled for most of the 20th century through free and fair elections – but built a powerful welfare system that has given the working class a 'middle class' lifestyle.

In South Africa there are no signs that the ANC's mystical status as the party of liberation is under immediate threat. Despite some ominous authoritarian tendencies, the movement remains remarkably transparent and internally democratic compared to other liberation movements, allowing dissent from below – whether from the youth or organised workers – to continuously pose a threat to elite aspirations. Indeed, ANC veteran Ben Turok feels that the ANC's 2010 National General Council was the 'most democratic' he ever attended (2010b). As long as this continues, challenges from the left outside the Alliance are likely to remain isolated and parochial.

The Alliance will remain in place for as long as the state can manage to appease the aspirations of the working class with relatively protective labour legislation and social grants. However, as recent surveys as well as election results show, ANC support amongst the broader

working class is slowly declining. Moeletsi Mbeki (*Business Day* 21 February 2011) is correct to warn that, as long as South Africa remains beholden to the minerals-energy complex (and, I would add, the financial sector) and does not develop secondary industries on a sustainable basis, the point will come when it will be unable to generate sufficient revenue from mining and related industries to provide social grants. At that point the social crisis will deepen, and let alone the Alliance falling apart, the entire country could experience its Tunisian/Egyptian moment.

Attempts to build a left pole of attraction outside the Alliance are, consequently, unlikely to have much impact on the political landscape in the near future. However, there is a role for independent socialists to define, in theory and in practice, a more imaginative, more participatory-democratic and 'eco-socialist' alternative. Unless the Alliance adapts, and steals its thunder, in the longer term its time might come.

Endnotes

1. Comments made at a Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) breakfast, Wits University, 5 February 2011.
2. In post-apartheid South Africa the term 'African' has been claimed by all South Africans, resulting in new hybrid terminology such as black African, coloured African etc.
3. See SADET (2006) for different perspectives on this issue.
4. These unions were initially more sympathetic towards the ANC – indeed the FCWU was a former Sactu affiliate (Pillay, 1989).
5. NUM was a former affiliate of the mildly black consciousness Council of Unions of SA (Cusa), which joined forces with the Azanian Confederation of Trade Unions (Azactu) to form the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) in 1986u.
6. Prominent figures include Numsa's Alec Erwin, Sactwu's Johnny Copelyn and the NUM's Marcel Golding.
7. In extreme form political unionism completely subordinates the unions to political party objectives, and robs them of real independence. Cosatu, on the whole, never quite went that far (Pillay, 2006).
8. This included the broad left within the Alliance, not just those supporting Zuma (conversation with Langa Zita of the SACP, November 2005).
9. The presidency's Alan Hirsch (2005) argues Gear was always mixed with an increasingly redistributive social policy.
10. ANC Kwa-Zulu Natal provincial secretary Sihle Zikalala (2010) shows that the Polokwane conference clearly affirmed the ANC as the political centre.
11. Cosatu and the SACP are suspicious of the intentions of the Youth League and the 'predatory elite', which it feels want to use nationalisation to increase opportunities for patronage. Nevertheless, unlike the SACP, Cosatu does feel that certain strategic sectors of the economy should come under state ownership, but with democratic control involving workers and consumers (starting with the current parastatals). The SACP wants to see 'socialisation' – democratic control – but believes it does not necessarily imply changes in ownership.
12. Discussions in December 2010 with a union leader in Cosatu (and SACP member) who actively promoted this idea, and in January 2011 with a former SACP official and DLF leader Mazibuko Jara who expressed scepticism about its viability. See also the *Sunday Independent* of 27/3/11.
13. The conference declaration contains a wide range of far-reaching proposals on social justice, economic growth and rights to health and education – a far cry from Cronin's alleged 'right-wing' liberal agenda.
14. Industrial Policy Action Plan 2.
15. This survey was conducted in 2008 by SWOP as part of a series of surveys done amongst Cosatu members before each of the past four national elections.
16. <http://www.timeslive.co.za/specialreports/elections2011/article1080059.ece/Vavi-wins-over-Nelson-Mandela-Bay>
17. Discussion with Vishwas Satgar, a key organizer of the DLF, February 2011.
18. According to Steve Faulkner of Samwu (discussion, January 2011), had affiliates been individually invited, some, like Samwu, would have attended, even if only as observers.

19. Key figures are Mazibuko Jara (formerly Nzimande's right-hand man in the SACP) and Vishwas Satgar (former Gauteng SACP provincial secretary).

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