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ABSTRACT

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***Theme: Building Movements against Neoliberalism and Neo-Nationalism***

Title: Trade union revitalization and the prospects of an 'ecosocialist' working class politics: the case of South Africa

The crisis of trade unionism reflects the broader crisis of legitimacy facing global capitalism - given widening social inequality, increasing unemployment and a deepening ecological crisis engendered by what some call 'fossil capitalism' (Altvater, 2007). The political and economic certainties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are now being increasingly questioned, obliging labour movements and the Left to re-evaluate past strategies. This means seriously considering a new politics that grapples with issues of top-down, patriarchal forms of organisation, and forges broad counter-hegemonic alliances that question economic growth paradigms that threaten the survival of the planet as we know it. This '21<sup>st</sup> century' ecological Marxism, or 'eco-socialism', seeks to re-embed the economy into society and the natural environment.

This paper critically examines the prospects of trade unions in South Africa meeting this challenge. The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's (NUMSA) path-breaking work on climate change and renewable energy in 2012, as well as its 2013 decision to build a broad united front and a 'movement for socialism', was pregnant with the possibility of forging a democratic eco-socialist politics. Indeed, enthusiastic observers likened NUMSA's 2013 decision to the 1973 'Durban moment', where a massive strike wave precipitated the re-emergence of independent, radical trade unionism in South Africa. NUMSA was meant 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 ruling African National Congress (ANC) and its South African Communist Party (SACP) ally, as well as provide a clearer leftwing alternative to the racial-populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

However, has NUMSA fulfilled this promise? Will the new SA Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU), initiated by NUMSA after it was expelled by the Congress of SA Trade Unions (COSATU), represent a new, revitalised form of trade unionism, or will it revert to old habits forged during the past century? While some still see a sweet 21<sup>st</sup> century tune within the discordant 20<sup>th</sup> century music, others, like former NUMSA spokesperson Castro Ngobese, have declared that "the NUMSA Moment is lost". This paper discusses the prospects and challenges

of the labour movement within the context of increased instability within the ruling Alliance, and revisits those moments of democratic eco-socialist promise, in light of these new developments.