

After 10 years of GEAR

COSATU, the Zuma trial and the dead end of Alliance politics

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South Africa's transition, as we stated in *Workers Solidarity* in 1998, went sour a long time ago. Overthrowing apartheid was a tremendous victory, but not enough. It was soon overshadowed by the ANC's neo-liberal policies, which built on those adopted in the last years of the apartheid regime.

LOST IN TRANSIT

As an increasingly multiracial ruling class consolidated its position, the working class retreated. This retreat was — and remains — fundamentally a question of politics and strategy: COSATU and the SACP had no idea how to deal with the new situation. Having spent years believing the ANC would, like Moses, lead the people out of bondage in Egypt, they now found themselves in a strange new country. Apartheid was gone, but slavery was not. The supposed Moses now looked a lot like Pharaoh, but COSATU and the SACP remained part of the Tripartite Alliance.

ALL GEARed UP

The miserable conditions in the townships continued, mass unemployment — which started in the 1970s — continued to grow, and neo-liberalism accelerated. 30% of TELKOM was privatised in 1996 and a further 20% was listed in 2003, and ESKOM and the SA Post Office were commercialised. While the GATT (now the World Trade Organisation) required tariff protection on telecommunications to fall to 20%, the government set itself the target of zero protection, and also opened up other controls over trade and capital movements. These approaches were consolidated in the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), but did not start with it.

The unproductive financial sector shot up to 20% of the entire SA economy, although it employed only 1% of the workforce, while manufacturing and mining shrunk, with perhaps 1 million jobs lost in these sectors plus agriculture. The electricity and water grid was expanded, but with cost recovery applied, 10 million people suffered water cut-offs and 5 million were evicted.

SAVING THE ANC'S SOUL

In this situation, COSATU and the SACP chose to try and save the unhappy marriage with the ANC. Afraid of being isolated from the seats of the mighty, flattered by pats on the head by ANC leaders, tempted by job offers, and unable to break with an almost religious loyalty to the ANC colours — and a well-established tendency to uncritically worship ANC leaders — union and Party policy makers spent fruitless years trying to redeem the ANC.

Reinforcing this approach was the longstanding, and seriously flawed, view that South Africa must have a two-stage “revolution”: a “national democratic stage,” led by the ANC, to end racism, followed by a “socialist stage,” in a vague future.

“Intervening” in the ANC, “contesting” it, “saving” its soul: these were the terms used to justify this approach. The fact that the ANC was — and always had been — a capitalist party that aimed to open up, as Nelson Mandela stated back in 1956, “fresh fields for the development of a prosperous non-European bourgeois class,” was ignored.

BEE-llionaires

The fact that the major debate within the ruling ANC after 1994 was on how to link neo-liberalism to Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) — the deliberate creation of the “non-European bourgeois class” — was ignored. The fact that the ANC had struck a deal with the apartheid-era ruling class, and had now joined it, was ignored.

COSATU and SACP positions moved from the naïve (the idea that the ANC would drop neo-liberalism if only it would let COSATU provide good advice) to the paranoid (there was a conspiracy against “transformation”). For organisations that spoke in the language of class struggle, there was nothing in the way of a class analysis of the realities of the situation.

COSATU and the Party were ignored by the ANC, and periodically insulted — except at election times, when their financial support and influence were eagerly sought. After elections, of course, it was business as usual, with South Africa’s particularly vile brand of capitalism flourishing. By 2006, the economy was booming, reaching 5% growth, the number of families with more than \$30 million each shot up four times, but the income of the bottom 40% of the population fell by nearly half.

ZUMA AND COSATU

This situation has played out in the Jacob Zuma controversy. Zuma, a leading ANC member, deputy president of South Africa, and head of the State-sponsored “Moral Regeneration Campaign,” was found to have been involved in corruption around the arms deal. His associate, Durban businessman Shabir Shaik, was found guilty in 2005, and Zuma himself now faces charges.

Mbeki, not a man to tolerate rivals in the ANC, used the opportunity to oust Zuma from office. Another bombshell followed, when Zuma was accused of raping a close family friend who, it transpired, was HIV-positive.

Now, it was fairly clear that corruption was not the main factor in Zuma’s dismissal. His replacement in office, Phumzile Mlambo-Nguka, was almost immediately involved in a scandal. She used a Falcon 900 executive jet of the SA Air Force to take her husband, children and friends on a holiday to the United Arab Emirates. It was also clear that Mbeki, an autocrat of the first water, was more than happy to use the judiciary and the State intelligence services to resolve internal disputes in the ANC.

COSATU’S POSITION

There was also nothing surprising in the fact that Zuma used every trick in the book to whip up support at the rape trial, ranging from crude Zulu nationalist appeals to a legal team that effectively put his accuser on trial. Mobilisations outside the courthouse drew in a wide range of groups, with many reactionary features, ranging from slogans like “Burn the Bitch” to placards saying “No Woman for President.”

A whole cult was built up around Zuma. The Friends of Jacob Zuma stated: “We, the people, will ensure that this man of honour, who dedicated his life to liberating us, will finally have the right to defend himself.” One protestor carried a cross, with a Zuma picture, claiming that this

“man of honour” was being persecuted “just like” another “man of honour,” Jesus Christ. This seems ridiculous, but it was typical of the Zuma mobilisations.

What was most surprising — at least at first glance — was COSATU’s almost uncritical support for Zuma during 2005 and 2006. The SACP was a bit more divided, but its Youth League was in the forefront of the Zuma mobilisation and the Friends of Jacob Zuma organisation.

STRANGE FRUIT

This seems strange at first, but it is the logical outcome of the dead end in which COSATU and the SACP find themselves after ten years of “engaging” the ANC, after ten years of futile complaints about GEAR, after ten years of COSATU policy documents gathering dust at Shell House.

Unable to break with the ANC, and unable to change it, the union and the Party placed their hopes in Zuma. Zuma had never uttered a word against GEAR, against capitalism or against neo-liberalism but he had one good point: he was not Mbeki, and it was hoped that he might be a new Moses to lead the people. After all, according to COSATU and SACP thinking, there must always be a great leader: the masses need to be led.

The “support for Cde Jacob Zuma,” Blade Nzimande of the SACP recently told the NUM, exposed popular opposition to the crises of corruption, factionalism and personal careerism” in the ANC, “crises” that were “inherent in trying to build a leading cadre based on capitalist values and the symbiotic relationship between the leading echelons of the state and emerging black capital.” The Party Youth League grandly stated that “Our defence and support for Jacob Zuma is the defence of the constitution.”

Meanwhile, speaking of the upcoming Zuma corruption trial, Zweli Vavi of COSATU called for Zuma to be reinstated in his positions: “We will ensure that whenever comrade Zuma appears in court, our people will demonstrate en-masse.”

EXODUS WITHOUT A MAP

Nothing can better express the bankruptcy of the political outlook of COSATU and the SACP than these positions. Zuma is no different to Mbeki: another rich politician, another false Messiah who misleads the working class, another ANC scoundrel who would implement GEAR as much as Mbeki. In no way whatsoever would he break with the ANC policy of developing “a leading cadre based on capitalist values” and a “symbiotic relationship between the leading echelons of the state and emerging black capital.”

However, there is nothing surprising about the COSATU and SACP position. Bound to the ANC by fear, flattery and a failed strategy — the two-stage theory that the ANC will open the door to socialism — and blinded by its traditional devotion to Congress and its leaders, the two organisations remain in a dead end. The fact that many of their leaders are only too eager to join the ANC leadership at the capitalist feast does not help either. In this situation, support for Zuma is certainly tragic but almost inevitable.

Support for Zuma allows the ANC to remain sacred and untouchable, and the politics of relying on a saviour untouched. A hard look at the nature of the transition can be avoided, and a serious struggle against capitalism postponed, yet again. All problems could be blamed on Mbeki and his faction: Zuma has been discovered to represent the shining soul of the ANC; Mbeki became

Satan overnight. In return for COSATU and SACP backing in the Alliance and internal ANC battles, the structures hoped Zuma might – just might – be nicer than Mbeki and might – just might – listen to the working class for a while.

This is what the pro-Zuma mobilisations by working class organisations mean. The outcome of a disastrous politics, they don't take the working class out of the dead end that loyalty to the ANC involves. The only way out is a break with the ANC, not a false choice between Mbeki and Zuma. The ANC is not the solution: it is a large part of the problem faced by the workers and the poor.

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