

Build a Better Workers' Movement

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The biggest single strike since the 1994 parliamentary transition in South Africa showed the unions' power. It won some wage gains, but it threw away some precious opportunities. We need to celebrate the strike, while learning some lessons:

- the need for more union democracy
- the need to use strikes to link workers and communities
- the need for working class autonomy
- the need to act outside and against the state
- the need to review our positions: against the Tripartite Alliance, for anarcho-syndicalism

Introduction

1.3 million state sector workers downed tools in August and September 2010, staying out for four weeks. It took place just weeks after government spent billions on the FIFA World Cup, in which the local ruling class used to transfer billions of rands from basic services to private purses.

It was the biggest state sector strike in recent history, dwarfing the month-long mass strike of 2007, involving COSATU unions. By some estimates, it was the biggest single strike since the 1994 transition to parliamentary democracy.

Many state schools were closed, hospitals were affected; courts were disrupted because stenographers and interpreters were part of the strike action. The Police arrested dozens of strikers for "public violence", sixty-one strikers by the seventh day. A prominent feature of the strike was the relatively high degree of interracial cooperation, given South Africa's history.

The settlement secured a 7.5 percent wage increase, and a R800 allowance, but also demonstrated serious problems in the union movement.

Problems to Face

The strike was called off from above, without due consultation. This centralisation is closely tied to the union leaders' being enmeshed in state-run industrial relations machinery, and party politics. It weakens unions, and breeds a dangerous cynicism to the unions.

The strike was also a lost opportunity. Its demands and campaigns were resolutely centred on wage demands.

The demands of groups like teachers and nurses for improvements in their incomes should have been linked to demands by poor and black working class communities for more and better schools, hospitals and basic services. This would have strengthened the strike, and started to rebuild unity between unions and community organizations – a source of power that has been lost. Instead, the capitalist and state media were able to present the strikers as greedy thugs who ignored school kids, the sick and the pregnant.

Unions are Essential

South African unions – like all unions, no matter how bureaucratized or conservative- are a vital bulwark of proletarian power against the ruling class. For all their contradictions and limitations, unions reflect the fact that society is divided into classes, based on wealth and power. They also reflect the fact that the working class has never won anything without a fight.

As Rudolph Rocker argued in *Anarcho-syndicalism*, the political rights and economic gains of the people are owed to “their own strength” expressed in “relentless struggles.”¹

Without unions, the average income of African workers in South Africa would be 20 percent lower than at present; that of white workers, 10 percent lower; non-union workers also gain significantly from negotiated wage settlements.²

But unless unions are democratized and decentralised, run from below, and independent of the state and its political parties, they will always be crippled. They also need to re-orientate towards other working class movements, outside and against the state, to fight for libertarian and socialist transformation from below. The ideas of anarcho-syndicalism (mentioned positively by Zweli Vavi at the 2009 COSATU Congress) provide a useful starting point; and also provide the theoretical framework for the following analysis.

Remarkable Unity

A key factor spurring the strike was the global financial crisis. 2009 saw world economic growth fall, and massive job losses. In South Africa, manufacturing shrunk by 22.1 percent and mining by 32,8 percent in the first quarter of 2009, with perhaps 770,000 jobs lost in the first eight months of the year.³

Further pressure on wages came from a range of sources, such as state utility ESKOM drastically raising electricity prices.

The mass strike involved workers from a range of unions, political backgrounds and races. Besides the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) – the main federation – the strike drew in 11 non-COSATU unions, linked together in the loosely organised Independent Labour Caucus (ILC).

State sector trade unionism has grown while mining- and manufacturing-based unionism has been hard hit. With 220,000 members, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) is the second largest affiliate of 2 million-strong COSATU. It is closely followed at 210,000 members by the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), which organises in hospitals, schools, universities and elsewhere.

The ILC links other unions, which include a large proportion of the more skilled layers of white, Coloured and Indian workers. Notable is the Public Servants Association (PSA), affiliated to the moderate Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA). Another is the National Union

¹ Rudolph Rocker, [1938] 2004, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, AK Press, p. 75

² Kristin Butcher and Cecilia Rouse, “Wage Effects of Unions and Industrial Councils in South Africa,” mimeo, online at citeseerx.ist.psu.edu

³ Figures: Haroon Borat, 2009, “Consequences of the Global Economic Crisis: early reflections for South Africa”, *Bargaining Indicators*, volume 13 (Labour Research Service: Cape Town); “Job Losses to Exceed a Million”, 29 October 2009, Fin24.com, at www.fin24.com

of Public Service and Allied Workers (NUPSAW), affiliated to the centre-right Confederation of South African Workers' Unions (CONSAWU).

SADTU and NEHAWU demanded substantial real wage increases: with inflation running above 6 percent, unions aimed at increases of 8.6 percent, and housing allowances of R1,000, backdated to 1 April. Unions also wanted a number of issues dating back to the 2007 state sector strike resolved, especially around medical insurance.

The state, claiming resource constraints, offered 6.3 percent on wages, leading to a one day general strike on Tuesday 10 August. Subsequent standoffs led to the rapid escalation of the strike actions.

The “No Resources” Myth

The state's hard-line was partly a result of its determination to impose the neo-liberal framework. It did not reflect a simple inability to pay, as state officials claimed.

With the largest economy and tax base in Africa, the state has potential fiscal resources unmatched in the continent. However, in line with the basic structure of the class system, resources are skewed to the ruling class.

South Africa's neo-liberal macro-economic policy of the ruling class – dating back to 1979, and accelerated from 1996- has seen state revenue shifted away from taxes on the rich and powerful. In 1980, the share of income tax on individuals in total state revenue was only 18%; by 2000, it was 44%. Indirect tax – centrally, sales tax, introduced in 1981 – shot up to 27% of revenue. This enabled company tax to fall to a mere 15% by 2000.⁴

Meanwhile, income tax was restructured regressively, in that tax cuts were twice as generous for high-income, than low-income, earners eligible for this tax.⁵ This situation obviously limits state ability and willingness to meet wage demands. It also reflects the way that existing social arrangements always prioritise the privileges of the rich and powerful. “State Sector” or “Public Sector”? This paper has spoken of a “state sector” strike, not a “public sector” strike. There is no “public sector” of the economy. There is a state sector, under the state managers, including politicians. There is a private sector, under the private capitalists. To speak of a “public sector” suggests the state serves “public” interests. On the contrary, the state is an instrument of ruling class power, which *cannot* serve the *working class* public. It can, as Rucker suggests, only be forced to make concessions through struggle from below.

When useful or necessary to the elite, resources are soon mobilised; the only constraints on the resources the elite can access are the rate of exploitation, the state of the economy, loan access, and the limits imposed by the resistance of the working class. The system is constrained by its very nature: in South Africa's highly unequal order, fewer than 6 million individuals pay 95 percent of income tax, and 90 percent of company tax revenue comes from 2,000 companies.⁶

Spending on the FIFA World Cup, designed to promote nationalism and foreign investment, spiralled to half a trillion rands. This was far in excess of original targets, but the money flowed.

⁴ Peet Strydom, 12 December 2000, “The effectiveness of South African fiscal policy,” at www.fnb.co.za

⁵ Lucien van der Walt, 2000, “GEAR versus social welfare,” *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol, 24, no. 3, p. 75

⁶ Annabel Bishop, 25 January 2011, “Civil servants wages eat into ability to build crucial capacity,” IOL online, www.iol.co.za

Moreover, as COSATU's Pat Craven noted, the state spent "huge amounts of money on World Cup tickets for their senior managers, on five-star accommodation for government ministers".⁷

While ANC leader and South African president Jacob Zuma earns over 2 million rand, many state sector nurses before the strike earned R57,000 annually plus a monthly housing allowance of R476; teachers' wages were at a similar level.⁸

It is not a question of whether resources exist; it is a question of how resources are controlled and allocated in an unjust class system shaped by struggles and other contradictions.

Political Temperature

The strikers showed deep determination to win better wages in the face of high unemployment, serious recession and overt state hostility. It also raised the political temperature. Many participants openly criticized the wealth and corruption of state managers and the politicians of the ruling African National Congress (ANC). This sort of hostility is common from non-COSATU unions.

The situation is more complicated for COSATU. COSATU is in a formal Tripartite Alliance with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). In striking against the state-as-employer, the union federation necessarily confronts the ANC-as-government. This gives strike action in the state sector a particularly charged character. The visibility of the corruption and cronyism of ANC leadership – a continual target of the private sector media – also means that the lavish lifestyles of top politicians are both well-known and widely resented.

It was clear during the strikes that many ordinary COSATU members were skeptical about the ANC politicians. Such distrust and anger is nothing new. It was very evident at the 2007 state sector strike when then-Minister of Public Service and Administration Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi had to be provided with armed protection from strikers.⁹

It was also evident in the 2004 state sector strike. In 2010, it was notably expressed in the heckling of ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe at the October SADTU congress.¹⁰

We Won, but Lost

The wage gains secured by workers amounted to a R6.2 billion increase in state spending – a remarkable gain.¹¹ But more was probably possible. The strike was suspended on the 6th September, and officially terminated by COSATU on Wednesday October 13th even though no deal had been struck with government. The next day, a 51% mandate from striking unions was still not reached. But with COSATU withdrawing, the ILC had to follow suit.

The decision to suspend the strike was, in short, imposed from above. It was taken despite the power of the strike movement, and the likelihood of a dramatic victory. And it was taken

⁷ "South African workers march in wage strike", 10 August 2010, at www.bbc.co.uk, accessed 25 September 2010

⁸ Chris Stein, 27 August 2010, "South Africa: Public Health Strained by Nurses' Strike," IPA, atallafrica.com, accessed 25 September 2010

⁹ IOLNews, 8 June 2007, "Fraser-Moleketi jeered by strikers", online at www.iol.co.za

¹⁰ M. Mataboge, M. Letsoalo and K. Seekoei, 8 October 2010, "Pandemonium at SADTU conference," Mail and Guardian online, at www.mg.co.za

¹¹ Bishop, 25 January 2011, "Civil Servants Wages"

without any mandate from below. Many ordinary workers declared the settlement a “sell-out,” a perception that lends itself to weak unions. Distrust means demobilisation.

SADTU did not sign the final agreement. Nor did the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA) of FEDUSA. Meanwhile, SADTU’s Mtata branch wrote an open letter, “SADTU LEADERSHIP HAS SOLD OUT”, on 6th September which demanded an end to “the current confusion.”

Autonomy or Corporatism?

One reason for the centralisation that undermined the strike is that the unions’ are deeply enmeshed in the state-run industrial relations machinery. The state is a pillar of ruling class power. Therefore extreme caution needs to be expressed in engaging with the law.

But rather than use labour law tactically –more specifically, using labour law only as a shield to build strong, autonomous unions – COSATU has committed itself to the official bargaining machinery, and to engagement in “social partnership” between classes. This is evident from its role in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), as well as in various forms of workplace and industry-level cooperation.¹²

This reinforces the trend towards centralisation of power and resources in the hands of the leadership, increases the power of full-time officials, office bearers and head office policy experts. It removes policy from real discussion at the grassroots; it makes negotiation above mass campaigning.

The tragedy is that these costs bring no benefits. COSATU has yet to decisively reverse a single element of the neo-liberal agenda via NEDLAC. Far more has been achieved from below – as the premature closure of the 2010 strike itself showed.

Mass struggles bring the people into action, shake off fear, raise political questions, and teach the vital lessons of “vital solidarity” between workers.¹³

ANC Alliance or Class Front?

Also key to understanding the strike’s suspension was that COSATU’s central leaders wanted the strike suspended before the ANC’s September 2010 National General Council (NGC).

COSATU maintains the Tripartite Alliance for two main reasons: *loyalty*, dating back to the *anti-apartheid* struggle, and *strategy*: the hope that the ANC can be shifted towards COSATU’s social democratic programme. (Doubtless some union leaders also view the Alliance as a route to senior government positions via the ANC).

All of this profoundly limits the willingness, and ability, of union leadership to adopt a course of confrontation with the ANC. The ANC’s NGC was set for 20th-24th September, and COSATU,

¹² NEDLAC’s slogan is “Building Bridges that Hold the Nation Together”. Its aims include “problem-solving and negotiation” on “challenges facing the country”. Requests for national level industrial actions, such as sympathy strikes, must go via NEDLAC. See www.nedlac.org.za, accessed 15 October 2010.

¹³ Rucker, p. 59

convinced that the Jacob Zuma leadership was open to a serious engagement with labour's social democratic policy positions, intended to participate fully.¹⁴

To maintain the strike during the NGC would have undercut this strategy, and potentially led to strikers protesting at the NGC.

Yet the events of the strike made it clear that the ANC is not pro-working class. It was the ANC government that forced the dispute into a protracted strike, that rejected strikers' demands, and that, through the state TV and radio stations, unambiguously presented strikers as greedy, irresponsible, violent and unprofessional. It was also the ANC that set the police and army against the strike. In addition, the ANC imposed a no work-no pay rule i.e. it docked wages from strikers.

And COSATU's alternative economic policy – centred on a mixture of Keynesianism, protectionism and union rights – was not even discussed at the 2010 NGC, despite initial ANC promises.

Militant Union Autonomy

Obviously the Alliance poses serious problems for COSATU's role as a union. It can hardly wage successful campaigns against neo-liberalism and inequality while allied to the ANC.

The ANC is a champion of neo-liberal policies, a vehicle of personal enrichment and corrupt state activity, and active in using state power to repress community protests and open political debate. COSATU is formally committed to non-racial integrated unionism; the ANC includes a racist Africanist wing that is overtly hostile to the national minorities: Coloureds, Indians and whites.

Neo-liberalism and the ruling class mean the ANC state necessarily resists state sector unions' wage demands. These undermine the framework of fiscal austerity. They divert money from private capital through taxation, and they take money from the budgets that state managers use for salaries, perks, tenders and scams.

The 2010 strike illustrates the absurdity of the Alliance. COSATU helps fund and build ANC election campaigns. These enable people like Fraser-Moleketi to get into office. Then, once in office, COSATU ends up having to wage mass strikes against the very ANC politicians it helped elect. Those same politicians meanwhile play on COSATU's loyalty to the ANC (and the formidable networks of patronage they wield through the state) to manipulate the unions.

A strong COSATU should be an independent, anti-capitalist, COSATU. That means a COSATU unshackled from the Alliance.

Obviously COSATU's overt support for Zuma's rise to the head of the ANC has benefited Zuma, not COSATU. Many naively believed he would reverse the neo-liberal trend.

Workers' anger at the ANC shows workers see some of the problems here. But without serious political debate and education, workers' anger and frustration will go nowhere; the Alliance will not collapse because of hot words in a strike.

¹⁴ COSATU does not participate in ANC structures as a distinct body; it does not have a block vote. However, COSATU members and leaders play an important role as ANC members and leaders, notably Mantashe, previously head of the main miners' union. Meanwhile, many COSATU leaders are ANC members.

Striking Against Whom?

Finally, we need to face even more awkward issues. As defenders of the strike, we stand by it. We celebrate its partial victory. But we cannot stand by it uncritically.

The union struggle was not linked to the struggles of other sectors of the working class.

On the contrary, the strike alienated many potential allies – unnecessarily, because an alternative set of tactics that linked the demands of groups like teachers and nurses to the demands of poor and black working class communities would have strengthened the strike, and started to rebuild unity

The strike was strongest by far in the state hospitals, and in state schools in the townships. In other words, the main impact of the disruption of production was on *working class* communities. Private hospitals were barely affected; private schools and well-resourced government schools ran as usual.¹⁵

The disruption of health and education only affected the ruling class *indirectly* i.e. inasmuch as it generated public outrage, not least by those personally harmed by the strike. This was a recipe for driving a wedge between different sectors of the working class: between working and poor people-as-producers and working and poor people-as-consumers.

It was in not dealing with this impact that unions failed abysmally. A court interdict forcing essential workers back to work was ignored. In one case, a procession of strikers, mainly nurses and cleaners, paraded through Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital while patients were left unfed and unattended. In another, pregnant women were turned away from a Johannesburg clinic focussed on women's health.¹⁶

Meanwhile, as year-end examinations loomed, the parents of school students fretted at the lost teaching time.

Winning Working Class Opinion

Such actions were widely publicised, of course forming the centre-piece of the state and commercial media's vilification of the strikers. They also enabled the state to present itself as the responsible guardian of the country, rather than as a miserly and hostile employer, that has also harmed larger sections of the African working class through bad health and education services.

Of course, it was hypocritical and self-serving of multi-millionaire ANC politicians to describe badly paid workers in run-down facilities as greedy and unreasonable. That does not, however, excuse a section of strikers for undertaking actions like barricading the entrances to hospitals.¹⁷

Zuma's condemnation of the strike had resonance precisely because such actions are widely and understandably condemned *within the working class*.

¹⁵ Some closed after threats of disruption by COSATU strikers. Personal communication, a teacher who did not wish to be named, 26 August 2010

¹⁶ "Pregnant women suffer as strikers stay away", 24 August 2010, Independent Online, at www.iol.co.za, accessed 25 September 2010

¹⁷ SAPA, 22 August 2010, "Zuma condemns Strike Violence, Intimidation", PoliticsWeb, at www.politicsweb.co.za, accessed 25 September 2010

Better Tactics

A more imaginative set of tactics may well have helped. For instance, if strike action was unavoidable, strikers should have raised demands that rallied the support of the broader working class. State hospitals and township schools are rundown and under-funded: if strikers had publicised these issues, and incorporated demands for improvements into their platforms, it would have been possible not only to capture proletarian public opinion but to draw parents, students and community groups into common campaigns.

Likewise, it was essential that the settlement in the education sector include an agreement for rescheduling end-of-year examinations. This did not happen; as a result a large reservoir of popular support was wasted and, in general, the strike had a negative impact on vulnerable groups like the working class elderly, the unemployed and school students.

In essence, the focus of the strike was strictly economistic, and left aside broader social and political issues. Despite a few fiery speeches from COSATU leaders like Vavi, the focus of the strike remained on incomes.

To have placed wider issues on the agenda – or to have actively fought the battle of ideas in public – would almost certainly have involved dealing with questions relating to the ANC and the Alliance, and would have increased the political temperature as a whole.

Build Better

Precisely because the strike took place in the state sector –unlike private industry *relatively* unaffected by the global economic crisis – the strikers were in a very strong position. This strength also provided an opportunity to raise demands around job security in the *private* sector

The narrow economism of the strike meant, however, that wage increases for government workers were prioritised over demands that would have united workers across the state/ private divide *within* the larger COSATU, CONSAWU and FEDUSA federations as well. None of the federations have managed to mount a serious campaign, on the streets, against job losses; this was an opportunity lost.

In place of the Tripartite Alliance, COSATU needs an alternative alliance: not with the ANC, but with other unions, as well as with the post-*apartheid* community movements that fight around issues like housing and electricity. The state is already moving to using the strike settlement against the unions: refusing to budge from its budget and pro-rich policies, it seems set to fund the wage settlement by cutting on basic services to working class communities, like roads and schools.¹⁸

Democracy and Labour

COSATU is correct that the “massive national challenges” in South Africa will not be resolved within a neo-liberal capitalist framework.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bishop, 25 January 2011, “Civil Servants Wages”

¹⁹ COSATU, 11 September 2010, A Growth Path Towards Full Employment: policy perspectives of the Congress of South African Trade Unions: Draft Discussion Document, COSATU, Johannesburg, at www.cosatu.org.za, p.120

It is clearly mistaken, however, to place its hopes for an alternative in the government, or in the ANC, or in tripartite corporatist forums. The hope lies in those anarchist luminary Mikhail Bakunin called the the “great, beloved, common people”, the masses.²⁰

South Africa’s unions play a key role in the protection of the working class. However, the unions face major challenges.

A lot of activism and work will be required to ensure trade unions focus the energy of the working class on the root causes of current social ills, and on the common links between the struggles of workers and the unemployed, unions and community movements, thus developing a broad front of oppressed classes to secure social and economic equality, as well as participatory democracy and social justice. This also means that unions need a clear vision of a libertarian and socialist transformation, and that the unions themselves remain under the strictest rank-and-file control.

²⁰ Bakunin, M. ([1872] 1971), “The International and Karl Marx,” in Bakunin on Anarchy: selected works by the activist-founder of world anarchism, George Allen and Unwin, pp. 294–295

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