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South Africa: COSATU & Social Movements

Michael Schmidt

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Recently, much debate has been generated in South Africa by the announcement by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) that it was launching a campaign against joblessness and poverty with a “united front” similar to the united democratic front that fought apartheid in the 1980s – and which was unilaterally disbanded by the now-ruling African National Congress (ANC) in 1990 because of its potential to pit the grassroots against the emerging ANC elite.

COSATU has remained an ANC loyalist organisation – despite the 1-million job-losses under ANC rule and the current rash of hundreds of thousands of mine, municipal and other workers out on strike. but it has recently made approaches to the Social Movements Indaba (SMI) with a view to joining hands on this campaign against joblessness and poverty (currently, some 40% of south africans are unemployed). the smi is an umbrella of new anti-neoliberal organisations – numbering some 200,000 supporters – founded in about 2000 by anti-apartheid veterans

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and socialist revolutionaries including anarchist-communists like ourselves.

For an in-depth report and our perspective on COSATU 's approach (we welcome rank-and-file collaboration between COSATU and the SMI, but say no to collaboration with the ruling elite), look at the article "the president from the skies vs the auntie who says 'no!'" in our journal "Zabalaza" (struggle), online at: www.zabalaza.net or a full version written for the centre for civil society at: www.nu.ac.za

Now, we read in "business day" that a survey by the human sciences research council shows that 75% of COSATU members still consider themselves ANC loyalists — meaning that 25% of its 2-million members, or 500,000 workers, have lost confidence in the ability of the neo-liberal elite to deliver "a better life for all" (the key ANC slogan) to the working class. the survey says that only 7% of those polled favoured cosatu breaking with the ANC and forming a "workers' party", an option favoured primarily by trotskyist militants within the SMI — but naturally opposed by ourselves as a tried-and-failed bourgeois approach to socialism as evidenced clearly by the betrayals of the workers' party (pt) government in Brazil currently.