South Africa and the Politics of Working Class Struggle

Despite receiving almost no attention in the international press, South Africa has once again become the scene of an all-important political struggle: the fight to advance and defend working class politics in Africa. While South Africa has been included in the well known BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa), which serves as an indicator of how the country’s economy is viewed internationally, there remains a deep, and in many ways widening, class divide separating South Africa’s political elites from the working class they are meant to represent.

The deepening rift between many workers, trade unions, and urban and rural poor, and the Alliance made up of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP) is cause for concern as the government of Jacob Zuma faces internal political challenges that threaten to rock his ruling coalition to its very foundation. While some commentators have framed the conflict as merely personal politics as leaders jockey for influential positions in the Alliance and government, the reality is that the emerging conflicts reflect a deeply divided society in which millions still yearn for the fruits of the revolution of 1994.

There are two distinctly different, yet inextricably linked currents in South Africa’s working class political movement. The first is the organized labor struggle, including powerful and politically active trade unions and organizations and their leadership which, more often than not, represents a significant locus of power in its own right. The second is the movement of urban and rural poor which represents the most economically marginalized group in the country, one that feels, with much justification, completely left out of the much touted economic growth the country has experienced in recent years. In examining how these political currents both independently and collectively engage with South Africa’s ruling class, including their demands and theaters of struggle, it becomes clear that though apartheid formally ended twenty years ago, the country remains deeply divided and sorely needing to realize the dream of the revolution.

COSATU Split: A Revolt Against the Ruling Elite

To understand how and why COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) is going through an internal leadership conflict, one must first recognize the competing factions within COSATU and the labor movement as a whole. On the one hand are those who remain steadfastly loyal to President Jacob Zuma and the ruling ANC Party which, according to many South Africans, has exercised an increasing degree of control over its people within the labor movement in an attempt to maintain control of workers’ politics. On the other hand is a small number of leaders within the movement who have openly challenged Zuma and the ANC, arguing that their leadership has exacerbated many of the deep seated economic and social problems facing the country, and that the government rules as much in the interest of transnational corporations and financiers as it does on behalf of the people. This important dichotomy is central to the political conflict (or power struggle, depending on whom one asks) playing out in the media and on the streets.

Perhaps the best illustration of the rift within the leadership of the labor movement is the suspension and persecution of COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, who was subsequently reinstated by the nation’s high court. It is an open secret that Vavi was demonized and had his character assassinated with bogus rape and
harassment charges because of his scathing critiques of President Zuma and the ruling ANC. As South Africa’s Mail & Guardian reported in 2012:

Senior union leaders of Cosatu affiliates and from the South African Communist Party, the ANC's and Cosatu's alliance partner, have held behind-the-scenes meetings recently to discuss a strategy to remove him [Vavi] from the position, the Mail & Guardian has established... Unlike Cosatu President Sdumo Dlamini, who is seen as a Zuma ally, Vavi has been vocal in criticizing the ruling party and government under Zuma's watch...This appears to have created a rift between him and other senior leaders in the federation. There has also been a falling-out between Vavi and Zuma. Vavi is believed to be in favour of leadership change in the ANC, although he has not said so publicly.

And so, it is clear that as early as 2012 there were powerful forces within the labor movement, and COSATU itself, that conspired with government forces and those loyal to Zuma, to oust Vavi from power. This anti-Vavi grouping included his colleague and President of COSATU Sdumo Dlamini who is well known to be an ardent supporter of Zuma, along with leading figures of the South African Communist Party. This faction saw in Vavi a serious challenge to their power as Vavi marshaled the forces of the Left with the rhetoric of class struggle and workers’ rights. Though his rivals have accused him of disingenuously employing the language of Socialist idealism, Vavi has firmly established himself as a leading critic of Zuma and the ANC as it currently is constituted and governs.

But of course the struggle is not simply an individual one between Vavi and Zuma. On the contrary, battle lines have been drawn within the labor movement as a whole, with Vavi being merely one of a number of influential leaders. Chief among these are the leaders of NUMSA (Nation Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) Irwin Jim and Karl Cloete, both of whom have expressed support for Vavi and champion the cause of splitting from COSATU in order to establish a worker-based movement for Socialism as an alternative to the near total monopoly of the ANC over working class politics. Again, some have charged that NUMSA’s leadership is cynically moving the union away from COSATU in order to cement their own control over the union and out of personal animosity towards Zuma, the ANC, and some of COSATU’s leadership. However, such arguments carefully evade the fundamental point that COSATU, like the South African Communist Party, has become a de facto wing of the ANC, an appendage of the ruling political elite who exploit the Alliance for votes without ever delivering the long promised economic benefits.

The divisions have even emerged within the individual unions themselves. In late October 2014, NUMSA President Cedric Gina resigned his post in a move widely seen as a means of distancing himself from the Vavi-Jim-Cloete axis of dissent against the ANC. This rift within the leadership of NUMSA is in many ways emblematic of the broader trend within the trade union movement in South Africa, specifically a growing divide between the more militant leftist leadership and that loyal to the ANC and Zuma. Many experts agree that such irreconcilable differences could lead to profound changes within the trade union movement as a whole, as a number of unions experience similar splits into rival camps. As South African political reporter Stephen Grootes wrote:

This again goes to confirm the theory that a split in Cosatu will actually lead to a split in most of its unions. It won’t be Cosatu splitting along union lines, it will be unions themselves splitting individually, along with Cosatu...In some ways, it’s to be expected that the union that seems to be about to be the first to leave the alliance would also be the first one to split itself. This is a tough decision to make and execute, and the stakes are extraordinarily high. People have long-running ties to alliance leaders, and will have different agendas to some of those who want to leave. Add to that the stress that comes with being the first to go, and there was always going to be fraternal blood on the floor.

Grootes makes a critical point about the nature of the unavoidable split within COSATU, namely that loyalty and allegiances to ANC and Zuma will cause splits within each individual union, with one camp pursuing a more radical independent agenda, while the other remains loyal to the government and the party. In essence then, the power struggle is really an existential struggle within the labor movement as a whole. Should organized labor pursue a socialist path that more directly reflects the needs and aspirations of its rank and file? Or, should labor remain within the ANC-COSATU-SACP Alliance that many argue is the only practical political formation given prevailing conditions in the country? The answer to this fundamental question will have profound implications for working people in South Africa in the generation to come.

The Politics of the Street

While the internal struggles within the South African labor movement continue to play out, a different political battle is raging in the streets and in the slums as the poor and unemployed organize in order to mount opposition to what they regard as the grossly unequal and unfair policies of the ruling ANC. Such organizations emerging from the grassroots to challenge the economic policies, which they regard correctly as neoliberal capitalist policies, have begun to make their voices heard throughout the country and in the halls of power.
One of the more noteworthy organizations now making an impact at the local and national level is the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), a leftist party led by Julius Malema, former head of the ANC Youth League until he was expelled only a year ago, the EFF has rapidly grown into a formidable political force capable of marshaling disparate groups into a somewhat cohesive and militant organization. A brief glance at the group’s manifesto illustrates unequivocally the politics of EFF and the concrete goals it has established:

- Nationalization of the land for agricultural purposes and other sustainable economic activities
- The abolition of all forms of foreign land ownership, and the institution of a land lease system for foreign investors and companies to use the land for sustainable economic activities
- Nationalization of the mining sector, with profits channeled into education, health care, and other social services
- Free quality education for the poor from early childhood to post-secondary education
- Adequate, affordable housing, sanitation, and other social services for all South Africans

The EFF’s manifesto includes many other proposals not elaborated here. However, these demands should not be anything new to the people of South Africa, as these are nearly identical to the demands issued by the ANC more than a generation ago. In fact, it is precisely these sorts of principles, coupled with a revolutionary commitment to overthrow the apartheid regime, which catapulted the ANC into power in the first place. Many in South Africa regard the EFF and Malema as the embodiment of an ideology long dead and buried within the ANC.

It should be noted too that Malema and the EFF are not pioneers in making these demands. Rather, they are following in the footsteps of their northern neighbor Zimbabwe which, under the leadership of President Mugabe and ZANU-PF, has implemented many of these same reforms. Though the road has been difficult for Zimbabwe, particularly due to the sanctions and other forms of subversion by the West, the country has persevered and continues on its path of indigenization and resistance to international finance capital and the neoliberal order.

Of course, EFF is not the only organization of note working at the grassroots level in South Africa. The Abahlali baseMjondolo (Abm) and Urban Shackdweller movement has made significant gains in recent years as it represents the interests of the poor, landless, and unemployed peoples of the country. AbM has been met with violence on a number of occasions when the organization rallied in defense of shackdwellers who built their homes on government land. There have been shootings, beatings, home demolitions, and much more perpetrated by government forces against the movement which has shown a resolve worthy of admiration. In honor of the mineworkers murdered by police thugs at Marikana in 2012, AbM members built their own community called “Marikana” in open defiance of the government’s ban on home construction without permits and on government land. The clashes with police led to a number of arrests and trials. AbM’s resistance continues today.

The Vultures of Finance Capital and Their Stooges

No single figure more clearly symbolizes the moral and ethical bankruptcy of the ruling establishment in South Africa than does Cyril Ramaphosa, the deputy to President Zuma. Ramaphosa not only is a corporate oligarch himself, he has shown utter disdain for the plight of mineworkers at Marikana (the scene of bloody repression against striking miners in 2012) and elsewhere. In fact, Ramaphosa referred to the courageous strikers at Marikana as “criminals” and urged “concomitant action” to be taken. In other words, Ramaphosa urged his fellow collaborators in positions of power to crack down on the Marikana workers and, in a very direct way, contributed to the circumstances that led to the massacre. However, in examining Ramaphosa and his clear allegiance to corporate interests, we must remember that he is no less than a traitor to the cause of the labor movement and the cause of social justice in South Africa.

Ramaphosa was seen as one of the heirs-apparent to Mandela in the wake of the 1994 revolution, having founded the National Union of Mineworkers. However, for a number of political reasons including conflict with former president Thabo Mbeki, he left the movement to establish a powerful and far reaching corporate empire. In so doing, he aligned himself with those same forces which, just a few years earlier, had been supporting the racist apartheid regime. Moreover, he became the exploiter of workers rather than the “crusader” his reputation would have had you believe. Now, this same traitor to the cause of the working class and social justice is in charge of shaping the economic destiny of the country. This is, to say the least, a sad state of affairs.

If the systematic oppression and repression of the workers and the poor were only the work of the ANC, perhaps it would be easier to mount effective resistance. However, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has effectively transformed itself into a collaborator in this injustice. As political author William Gumede points out:
[COSATU] has to deal with the perception that there is a deep divide between union members and leaders, who are seen as the new elite, while the rank and file, grassroots members are struggling... There is the feeling that the alliance is not giving them as much as they are putting into it... The alliance for many ordinary members doesn’t offer much protection or deliver material benefits.

The inescapable fact that Gumede and others have pointed out is that COSATU has transformed itself into the political elite of the labor movement, contenting itself with trying to influence elections and the ANC, thereby allowing the ruling class to continue their exploitation of the workers. In fact, it is this form of collaboration, along with the continued institutionalized white privilege, which has created what lawyer, lecturer, and activist Tshepo Madlingozi has referred to as “class apartheid”. This is a critical point because, as we examine the legacy of the post-apartheid rule of the ANC, we must critique it based on the reality of life for the people, not the ascension of a select few.

The current power struggle within the labor movement, not to mention the mineworkers’ strikes at Marikana and elsewhere, demonstrates clearly the discontent of the workers at their supposed labor representatives. The wildcat strike at Marikana, unsanctioned by the National Union of Mineworkers, itself an affiliate of COSATU, was led by what can be called a dissident union, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). This breakaway faction led by workers shows the power, but also the danger, of challenging the status quo in South Africa. Moreover, it shows the degree to which COSATU is in bed with the ANC and the ruling class in South Africa.

The uprising of organized labor in South Africa is merely a product of the corruption, ineptitude, and betrayal of the ANC and the ruling establishment. Instead of representing the people and propelling the country in a progressive direction, away from the horrific legacy of apartheid and toward a prosperous future for all South Africans, the ANC leadership and its collaborators have shown themselves to be traitors to the cause of social justice and freedom which, at one time, the ANC symbolized. By pushing a neoliberal economic agenda while simultaneously silencing dissent and suppressing worker uprisings, the ANC has to a large degree discredited itself. It is now time that the voice of the people, not just the elite few, finally be heard.

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