

South Africa in 2010: a history that must happen

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The social weight of organized, mobilized workers is beginning to consolidate in South Africa. The recent public sector strike was a shining example, writes Trevor Ngwane.

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South Africa is a country on a roller coaster to disaster. A recent paper written by the leadership of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU [1]) attests to this [2]. While the paper argues that the country is at a crossroads, a close reading reveals a deep anxiety and even panic among union leaders who are very worried and suggest that the country is heading towards crisis. I would say South Africa is already in crisis and unless there is a drastic and sharp turn to the left, the wheels are going to come off the roller coaster.

The roller coaster country

What is exciting about a roller coaster ride is its hurtling speed and unpredictability, simultaneously evoking feelings of exhilaration and fear. That is how it feels like living in this country these days. In the last couple of months or so, for example, one moment people were giddy with excitement as South Africa hosted the World Cup in June 2010. The government pulled out all the stops to make a success of the event: nothing was allowed to stand in the way of achieving a successful hosting with up to R70 billion (US 9.6 billion) of public money spent. Hardly a month later, health, education and other essential government services ground to a halt as 1.3 million public sector workers went on strike demanding a living wage. The government pleaded poverty but this was not convincing and the strike went on for three weeks, with dire consequences for ordinary people: babies dying for want of medical care, students worried sick as they lost valuable time preparing for high school exit exams, families at a loss as government morgues failed to release the bodies of deceased loved ones for burial, and so on. The common humanity and collective excitement that was shared during the World Cup was replaced by anger and fear as the strike turned violent. It was as if it was not the same country.

The strike by government employees was the culmination of a year of heightened protests and strikes that had gripped the country beginning immediately after the April 2009 national elections

which saw Jacob Zuma of the African National Congress (ANC) become president of the country. Many would find the analogy of a roller coaster appropriate to describe Zuma's rise to power. Indeed, during his campaign to become ANC president he was described by his supporters as an unstoppable tsunami. But it was touch and go all the way to the high seat for Zuma. At one point he faced fraud, money laundering and a spate of other corruption-related charges, which he miraculously escaped, including getting an acquittal after a lengthy and much-publicised rape court trial. His accomplice in the corruption charges, Schabir Shaik, received a 15-year jail sentence, which - surprise surprise - he is serving in the comfort of his own home after receiving parole for being. May he live long.

South Africa continues to be overwhelmed by community protests, which often take the form of veritable riots, with public and private property getting torched or vandalized. Since April 2009 the number of protests mostly by poor working class communities demanding development and basic services soared, leading to some analysts suggesting that this country has the highest rate of protests in the world. This increase in the number of protests was not expected because since 2000 there were protests that were mainly organized by issue-based social movement organizations and, after 2004, the protests changed in character and tended to involve whole communities rising up in rebellion. Later there was a strike wave that culminated in the 2007 public strike, then the biggest in the country's history. This turmoil saw the unprecedented recall of a sitting president of the country, Thabo Mbeki, who was removed from office by his own ANC comrades before his term of office was over. The removal of Mbeki and his replacement by Zuma coincided with the birth of the "new ANC" that was supposed to be different from the Mbeki-led ANC, which was blamed for the hardship and suffering that sparked off the protests and strikes. When Zuma took over everyone expected the protests to stop since the evil president had been replaced by the man of the people. Instead the protests intensified. Today the Zuma administration faces the wrath of striking government employees, most of whom are members of COSATU unions, a COSATU that played a large role in defending Zuma during his days of political and legal trials and helped him become president.

The reader will agree with me that indeed South African politics feels like a roller coast ride. What exactly is going on? Where is South Africa going? How can disaster be averted?

A revolution derailed

The short answer to the question of what is going on in South Africa is that a revolution was derailed here and what we see are the consequences of that. The workers are going on strike and communities are rising up in protest because ordinary people are not getting what they fought for during the struggle against apartheid and capitalism. Millions were involved in a long and bitter struggle against statutory racism and economic exploitation. Most of those who fought did so inside the country and there were many South Africans who went into exile to take the struggle forward. It was not just South Africans who fought; at one point the anti-apartheid movement was one of the greatest solidarity movements in history, with people all over the world doing their bit to get rid of apartheid. During the course of the struggle people developed definite ideas about the kind of society they wanted to build after the demise of apartheid. The "new South Africa" would be a free country, without racism, without oppression, without exploitation, without all the ills that afflicted the hated apartheid system. The problem today is that many of these ills continue to blight our post-apartheid society, hence the turmoil in the country.

South Africa, with a Gini coefficient of 0.86, is reputed to be one of the most unequal societies in the world. What is amazing is that there is more inequality in post-apartheid South Africa than during

the dark days of apartheid. The hardships related to this injustice are too many to list here. But one example is unemployment, which stands at more than 40 percent in this country of about 48 million inhabitants. Last year alone the country lost 1.1 million jobs due to the global economic meltdown. About 48 percent of South Africans live below R322 (USA 44) a month per person. Meanwhile the top 20 directors in the Johannesburg Stock Exchange earn on average 1,728 times the average income of an ordinary worker. An average African man earns about R2,400 per month while his white counterpart earns R19,000. I must quickly point out that today there is more inequality among African people than between blacks and whites. What this points to is that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer in South Africa; there is class formation and differentiation that expresses itself in race, gender and other dimensions. While there is a new class of black bourgeoisie and a rise in the black middle class, the white capitalist class and the old middle classes are getting richer and they still largely own and control the country's wealth, with dire consequences for the working class.

There is great anger and frustration among ordinary people in South Africa and it is this anger which explains the protests and strikes happening all over the place. The public health care system is close to collapse mainly because the rich, including government ministers and others who can afford private health care, do not use public services. Life expectancy has drop from 62 years in 1992 to 48 years today. HIV/AIDS has added to the catastrophe. But all this suffering would perhaps be tolerable if ordinary people were not daily confronted by the conspicuous consumption of the nouveau riche black bourgeoisie and upper middle class, many of whom are senior government politicians and civil servants, including, significantly, business people who have made their money through securing state tenders. Politically connected individuals are making so much money from government tenders that the term "tenderpreneur" has been added to the country's lexicon. Cabinet ministers use state funds to buy cars that cost over R1 million and spend months sleeping in 5-star hotels. Sexual shenanigans by the new elite are eclipsed by none other than the president himself, whose wives receive state support in their capacity as official first ladies; he was recently reported to be expecting the birth of his 22nd child by a fiancée who will become his 4th wife in January next year. The fact that Zuma's son and nephew were involved in a recent scandal involving billions of rands in a shady mining rights deal has led even ANC alliance partners in the South African Communist Party (SACP) and especially COSATU to cry foul. Indeed, in its discussion paper on the current political situation COSATU argues that South Africa is developing into a "predator state" where a class of black capitalists, under cover of the country's official policy of "Black Economic Empowerment (BEE)", enrich themselves through control of and ties to the state.

We can see therefore that the revolution that was supposed to improve the lives of ordinary people in South Africa has been derailed and an elite has developed that is enjoying the benefits of uhuru (freedom). But how can it be? How did the country reach this sorry state a mere 16 years after independence?

The politics of class collaboration rules

It would be wrong to argue that nothing has changed or nothing good has happened since the ANC took power in 1994. South Africa has a lot to be proud of. Under apartheid there was no political freedom, no freedom of speech, no universal franchise and blatant racism was the order of the day. There has also been notable improvement in gender relations, with women accorded equal status with men. South Africa is one of very few countries where same-sex marriage is allowed. The ANC government also put great effort in improving the lives of ordinary people by extending access to water, electricity, housing and other basic necessities. Under Thabo Mbeki the social security network was extended so that millions of people receive government "social grants", that is, old age

pensions and child and disability grants. Mandela is famous for his effort trying to forge a united nation out of a history of conflict and division. But all the problems listed above and the burgeoning dissatisfaction tell us that much more needs to be done. The question is what needs to be done and what are the obstacles?

During the days of struggle against apartheid, the ANC was closely allied to the SACP and many people expected the new democratic government to follow, if not a socialist policy, at least a social democratic one. This seemed the only way in which the economic legacy of apartheid and capitalism could be fought and reversed. Under apartheid the wealth of the country was monopolized by the whites and in the hands of a few big corporations. The Freedom Charter, a document that inspired the struggle in South Africa for decades, stated clearly that the “commanding heights” of the economy would be nationalized in order to benefit everyone. It was not to be, as on the eve of independence, the ANC, the SACP and COSATU, members of the Tripartite Alliance that was to govern the newly independent country, opted for the capitalist route to development. Instead of a struggle against capitalism, a policy of class collaboration between the working class and the capitalist class was adopted. It was in this context that the idea of encouraging the growth of a black “patriotic” bourgeoisie was adopted as state policy in the form of the BEE. The ANC was hardly two years in power when it abandoned the capitalist but mildly redistributive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) and adopted the neoliberal and World Bank co-authored Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). Although the SACP and COSATU were uncomfortable with this policy shift, their leaderships did little to fight it. This was because they believed that somehow it was possible to secure and promote the interests of the working class without an open struggle against capitalism and the capitalist class. This approach led to the strengthening and consolidation of capitalism in South Africa and, in line with trends elsewhere, along neoliberal lines.

As neoliberal policy began to bite and the working class began to suffer under the ANC regime, the SACP and COSATU leaders refused to change their political approach. As a solution they sought to install a “worker-friendly” president in power, hence the anti-Mbeki pro-Zuma campaign which began in 2005 and culminated in the recall of Mbeki and Zuma’s ascendancy. Today, more than a year after Zuma became the country’s president, it is becoming clear that changing the man has not led to a change of policy. According to COSATU the Zuma regime has continued to implement the same neoliberal policies that were blamed on Mbeki. Weitzman Hamilton, a socialist in South Africa, has argued that Zuma provided the last cover for the bankruptcy of the SACP-COSATU political approach. Indeed, the policy of trying to balance the needs of workers with those of capital appear to have reinforced the power of the capitalist class in South Africa by providing the capitalists with fresh recruits from the ranks of the leadership of the national liberation movement. As more and more ANC leaders “made it” and became overnight millionaires, the ANC, which heretofore was listening with one ear to the working class and with the other to the capitalists, began to listen with one ear to the capitalists inside the ANC and with the other to the capitalists outside the ANC. This is the situation today. The recent public sector strike is a good illustration of this point, as workers wise up to this reality.

The public sector strike

The public sector strike ended clumsily with union leaders imposing a unilateral “suspension” saying they are giving the ANC government 21 days to improve its settlement offer. The workers were demanding an 8.6% increase and a R1,000 (US 138) housing allowance. But the government’s final offer was a 7.5% increase and R800 (US 110) housing allowance. The leaders threaten that they will resume the strike if negotiations with the government do not yield a satisfactory outcome. However, many workers who were on strike are reported to be unhappy with the decision to call off the strike despite the strain of being on the streets for three weeks. Some are saying outright that they were

“sold out” by the union leaders. The suspension of the strike is a creative and confusing use of the country’s labour laws and, to me, is an indication that there is a history that needs to happen in South Africa. It is a history that requires workers to defeat the politics of class collaboration of the union leaders and face up to the Herculean task of getting rid of capitalism. I have indicated above how the power of the capitalists was strengthened rather than weakened with the attainment of liberation.

During the course of the strike it was as if this history was already happening. For three weeks 1.3 million workers put down their tools and stood united in struggle against the ANC government demanding a wage increase. Many of the workers belonged to COSATU-affiliated unions and the Independent Labour Caucus; the latter is made up of independent unions and union federations, some of which traditionally organized white collar workers and white workers. The workers displayed their power and unity in action and were able to defy court orders that disallow nurses and other “essential workers” from striking.

To fully understand this strike we have to compare it with the 2007 public sector strike. The present strike built on the old strike. For example, the 2007 strike undermined the power of the argument that workers cannot strike against their “own government”. It was also able to unite 17 public sector unions, quite an achievement given South Africa’s racially and ideologically divided history of unionism. But in 2007 there was no attempt to get workers in the private sector to come out in solidarity with their comrades in the public sector, something which could have been achieved by the union leaders merely by making a telephone call. This time there was an attempt by COSATU to organize sympathy strikes in the mining, auto and municipal sectors with some unions submitting the 7-day notice period required by the law for sympathy strikes. The sympathy strikes never happened as they were averted at the last minute when Zuma instructed government negotiators to go back to the table and improve their final offer which at that time stood at 7% and R700 (US 96) housing allowance. The government was under pressure at the time because the police and soldiers were also threatening to strike in solidarity with their comrades. I should point out that in 2007 the resolution of the strike was problematic because it was based on the “occupational specific dispensation”, that is, certain categories of workers – teachers, nurses and doctors – were given bigger increases than other public sector workers. This time the strikers united behind common demands to the bitter end.

Both the 2007 and 2010 strikes received public sympathy mainly because many ordinary South Africans are fed up with the ANC government. A lot of anger was directed at President Jacob Zuma. The workers’ placards taunted him for his polygamous marriages and promiscuity, they complained that he was visiting China during the height of the strike, and they also expressed unhappiness with government “fat cats” with some referring directly to the multi-billion rand business deals secured by Zuma’s relatives since he became president. There were pointed reminders to Zuma that it was the working class that had supported him when he faced criminal charges for rape and corruption and when he was under attack from Thabo Mbeki during their power struggle. Underlying this was a feeling of betrayal by Zuma, no doubt a consequence of the COSATU and SACP leaderships’ drumming up support for him on the grounds that he was a friend of the working class. The latter point explains why the COSATU discussion paper worries that: “Amongst our constituency there is a degree of despondency, and people are beginning to question our strategies”. (p.15)

Meanwhile, even as the public sector strike ends, there are strikes in the motor components sector with workers demanding what they call a “double digit” increase. This strike is affecting petrol service stations and has led to many car plants like Mercedes Benz stopping production. Some analysts have attributed the determination of the public sector workers as inspired by a series of strikes that happened immediately before the World Cup, when workers in the transport and electricity sectors, both run by government-owned companies, won double digit increases. Many

people believe the government had no choice but to grant these increases because the strikes would have disrupted the hallowed sports event. But it was the public sector strike that pointedly problematised the relationship between government and the trade unions and appears to have direct political implications for the country.

Lessons from the strike

I think the strike taught millions of workers, both those on strike and those watching the strike, two main lessons. Firstly, that if the working class wants public services that are properly resourced and staffed by well-paid workers it cannot rely on using pressure and persuasion on the ANC government. Force is necessary. The working class needs to build a power that will compel the government to do what is in the interest of the working class rather than of the capitalist class and its allies. Secondly, that that power lies in the hands of workers themselves rather than in “worker-friendly” government leaders. The strike served to undermine some of the lack of confidence and loss of hope afflicting the working class in South Africa. To change history in their favour, workers need to build solidarity with members of their own class, solidarity in action rather than in feelings and words.

The clumsy way the union leaders have ended the strike provides a third crucial lesson for workers. The strike, no matter how powerful and authoritative, is not enough to sustain and carry forward the working class struggle and deliver on workers’ needs. Also necessary is organization and a politics that consistently puts the interests of the working class first. The union leaders’ action exposes the core of their politics as class collaborationist; they seek solutions in agreements with a capitalist government and in accommodation with capitalist interests. The threatened sympathy strikes between public and private sector workers pointed to the only way to secure a workers’ victory; they also began the process of breaking down the invisibility and immunity enjoyed by capital in South Africa, and the belief that the ANC is “our government”. The strike put the question of the power of government and the limitations of the capitalist system on the agenda. It might not be so clear in the minds of millions of workers but after three weeks of struggle the workers are different from the people they were two weeks ago.

The strike challenged the reality of capitalism because this type of struggle will face public sector workers again and again. Indeed it faces all workers. There will be no solution for workers under capitalism. The members of the public who suffered because of the strike must know that the power to end their suffering lay in the hands of a government that could simply end it by giving the workers what they want. The struggle is not about getting the ANC capitalist government to correct its policies and change its leaders. It is about alternatives – fighting to put in power a government that consistently puts the interests of the working class first – a workers’ government. That is the history that the strike tells us needs to happen in South Africa and in the world.

Despite the analogy of a roller coaster I started off with I want to end on a hopeful note. The hope arises out of the public sector strike even though it has ended inconclusively, and some would say in betrayal. The strike, seen in the context of other strikes and the many community protests taking place in the country, suggests that something new is happening in South Africa. The solidity and breadth of the public sector strike indicates that the seeds of something better, albeit scattered in the isolated different working class outbursts, are beginning to grow. The social weight of organized, mobilized workers is beginning to consolidate. It is not just about the ANC-SACP-COSATU Alliance, nor is it about the government, the state, the capitalists, the leadership or the left. It is about what millions of ordinary working class people are thinking and feeling – and beginning to do. This is what we need to look at and follow closely. This is where the hope and the work of revolutionary socialists

lie. The revolution is not a Sunday school picnic and will no doubt feel like a roller coaster. But this time it will be a ride not to disaster but to a world where all forms of oppression and exploitation are eradicated. Not just in South Africa, but everywhere in the world. The workers are showing the way.

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P.S.

* From Counterfire:

<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/features/38-opinion/6579-south-africa-in-2010-a-history-that-must-happen>

* Trevor Ngwane is a member of the Socialist Group, a small collective of socialists active in the social movements and trade unions in South Africa. [from The Bullet]

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.cosatu.org.za/>

[2] See on ESSF: [COSATU CEC Political Discussion Paper](#)