

Time for political alternative: Can South Africa's Anti-Capitalist Left Rise to the Occasion?

Thursday 18 December 2014, by [Amandla!](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2014).

In order to understand the crisis in COSATU, we must view it against the backdrop of '20 years of democracy' and the balance sheet of impacts on poor and working people. Because the liberation struggle was waged in the name of the promise of justice, decent work and security, a sober assessment of the fate of labour under South Africa's 'political democracy' goes to the heart of the question of the success of that struggle, and the dispensation it has produced.

The facts are both clear and unkind to those who would suggest that twenty years of ANC rule has gone any significant distance towards overcoming the toxic legacy of capitalist apartheid. We publish in this issue [of *Amadla!*] an excerpt on unemployment from AIDC's forthcoming booklet, *The State of Labour at 20 Years of Democracy*, by researcher Niall Reddy; it provides a harrowing overview of the state we're in:

Unemployment: The main employment trend to be noted since 1994 is a shift towards the 'tertiary sector' of retail and service jobs. Manufacturing employment has grown only slowly during the period, while the primary sector - mining and agriculture - has actually declined. Overall growth in job numbers has not kept pace with that of new entrants to the job market. The evidence also shows that many of the high-growth sectors offer lower wages, while sectors that contracted as a proportion of total employment are associated with higher pay.

Wages: The data show that even the minimal promises made by advocates of "free markets" have not been met since the end of official apartheid: Workers in the bottom half of the earnings scale have received only a fraction of total wages. Overall increases in average wages have been driven entirely by increases for higher earners - specifically those at the very top of the distribution (e.g., CEOs and other senior managers, who misleadingly are counted as 'workers' in the statistics). Lower skilled workers actually saw stagnant real wages, while semi-skilled workers saw wage declines early in the period before a small increase beginning in 2011. Skilled workers saw moderate gains between 2001 and 2007, after which their wages declined. Only highly skilled workers at the top of the income distribution and the managerial elite have seen significant increases.

Job Quality and Security: During this period, the proportion of workers employed through labour brokers has risen massively. The use of labour brokers makes it difficult for workers to take action against the companies that direct their work and determine their work conditions, because the company will argue that the worker is technically employed by a third party - the labour broker. Because of this confusion, relatively few workers actually identify themselves as being employed by labour brokers, but the available data suggest that at least one million workers are involved in such employment relationships. Some experts estimate the real figure is more like two million. This gives companies enormous advantages over workers, and can be seen as part of a wider set of

mechanisms through which capital disciplines labour in order to keep wages down.

Labour Laws and Institutions: The negotiated settlement and its associated 'social compact' gave rise to a number of legal provisions and bureaucratic mechanisms ostensibly intended to ensure stable, productive, and eventually 'emancipatory' labour relations after 1994. Bargaining councils as well as institutions like NEDLAC, CCMA, and Section 27 of the Employment Equity Act, were supposed to provide workers with opportunities to secure their interests without undermining ambitious hopes for economic expansion. The Marikana massacre, massive wildcat mining strikes, and the farm worker rebellion in the Western Cape have left no doubt such mechanisms are in crisis, and arguably have failed.

Unions: Between 2001 and 2011, rates of unionisation have decreased in all sectors, in most cases between 2 % and 5 %. In the services sector, the decline has been even steeper, at 5.71 %. Employment growth has generally been faster in sectors with lower union involvement. Employment in manufacturing - which includes a large proportion of unionised workers - grew by only 2.84 %. Surveying the carnage outlined in chalk by this empirical evidence, even the ANC's most loyal supporters among the working class must feel the need to ask whether the ANC and the alliance have served the interests of poor and working South Africans, and whether it can offer a way out of the desperate crisis facing the country's majority.

Given the legacy of South Africa's working class movement, it is actually quite surprising that it has taken so long for the ANC-led alliance to unravel. But we have clearly now entered a new period, in which the alliance is unquestionably unravelling. This affords both dangers and opportunities.

As if the deepening social crisis described above were not sufficient reason for alarm, we must also face the fact that the global economic system seems clearly to be peering into the abyss of another massive crisis. As Brussels based economic historian and journalist Benny Asman argues in his contribution to this issue, there are "definite signs that the world economy is in for a new crisis". Falling global prices for raw materials and oil, austerity-induced stagnation in the Eurozone, slowing growth in China, rising inequality in the US and elsewhere, and other signs point overwhelmingly to another looming contraction, possibly severe. Even the praise-singers of recovery have mostly fallen silent.

And yet, even that is not all. Writer, historian and long-time climate activist Jonathan Neale reviews the recent US-China deal - portrayed in the mainstream press as a major, binding commitment to reduce greenhouse gases - and finds it to be 'appalling'. This corrupt deal is just the latest elite attempt to ensure that nothing changes - another symptom of the complete capture of institutions of governance by the toxic logic of extractivist, fossil-fuel-driven capital accumulation.

This poses a major strategic question for working class activists: how to re-build an anti-capitalist politics that doesn't repeat the failed formulas of the past, but takes into account the profound transformations that have taken place not only in South Africa but globally - through interlocking processes of globalisation, financialisation, shifts in labour composition, and social differentiation within the working class.

When compared with the task of unifying COSATU, which has received so much attention in the press and amongst the chattering classes, the task of building real working class unity is massively more challenging. The divisions within COSATU reflect on a small scale the social divisions that exist within the working class, both in South Africa and abroad.

This challenge - of building real working class unity - is made more complex by the unravelling of a non-racial consciousness within the movement since at least 1994, and the emergence of deep,

reactionary divisions based on racial, cultural and 'ethnic' identities. In the face of an increasingly fierce struggle for scarce resources and scarcer opportunities, identity has become a powerful and tempting motivation for both economic aspiration and political ambition. It is a double-edged and often a toxic weapon - one that can deepen divisions within the working class, undermining prospects for both political unity and practical solidarity.

The monumental challenge we recognise even by posing the question of unity just between the so-called 'coloured' and 'African' working class communities provides an insight into the depth of the problems that we face. These challenges cannot be avoided, nor the solutions be taken for granted.

And the mighty task we have been handed - of attempting to overcome identity-based factionalism in the name of working class unity - lies squarely at the feet of the ruling party. Not even two years ago we celebrated 100 years of the formation of the ANC - an organisation that once set out boldly on the road to overcoming 'tribal' divisions. Today, the fact that the ANC has become so dominant in the KwaZulu Natal region is largely due to a fatal capitulation to Zulu nationalism often chauvinism.

It is in relation to this latter challenge that we must understand the call for a new 'United Front'. While we must resist any temptation to simply mimic the UDF of the 1980s, there are also valuable lessons to be drawn from that experience, and we should actively recall them and consciously refresh our recollections, while also striving for new insights into the strategic question of building class alliances, and into crafting a political programme around which a broad alliance can be built that can advance the interests of the majority. The irony of our reality is that it still remains the task of the working class to forge national unity - yes, to build the nation.

However, the lesson of the last twenty years told so eloquently by the statistics quoted above regarding the state of the working class in South Africa, is that this nation cannot be built without the radical redistribution of wealth. It cannot be built on capitalist foundations.

It is for this reason that any movement serious about providing a serious left alternative must revisit the national question. Above all, this means how a class-based left can successfully challenge non-class-based identities, when the latter are often so dominant amongst many working and poor people.

The call for a united left, which NUMSA is in effect leading, must also respond very concretely to the need for livelihoods for the 8 million South Africans who are unemployed, and must forge ways to do so with wreaking ecological havoc on the country through accelerated resource extraction.

As the impacts of climate change become increasingly evident, it is clear that competition over food and water resources will be a source of intensifying conflict. As this issue of *Amandla!* goes to press, we read of police shooting unarmed people in Mzamba who were gathering rice from an overturned lorry, reportedly killing at least two and wounding several more. Without a decisive shift from the politics of enforced scarcity out of respect for the profit making system, such violent confrontations over increasingly privatised, commodified and monopolised resources are sure to become more frequent.

We cannot expect quick or definitive answers to these questions, but they must become entrenched at the heart of the debate amongst those who are looking for a political alternative.

These are daunting tasks. Together, they constitute the challenge of our lifetimes. We must rise together and meet them if we are to have any chance of pursuing a genuinely emancipatory politics through South Africa's accelerating political realignments.

P.S.

* From Amandla! no. 37/38, December 2014. <http://www.amandla.org.za>