

# South Africa could use a communist party

Friday 31 January 2020, by [FOGEL Benjamin](#) (Date first published: 27 January 2020).

**As we enter a new decade, South Africans have little cause for cheer between load-shedding, ANC fratricidal strife, the annual slaughter on our roads and bleak economic prospects. The ANC continues to present its cosplay version of unity while tearing itself apart. As the party and its allies tick off yet another anniversary and annual party, they continue to deny the factional strife that the whole country knows is taking place beyond the bacchanalia, praise singing and performative nostalgia.**

The opposition parties are not doing much better: the Democratic Alliance seems determined to mimic the ANC's destructive tendency towards infighting, and the Economic Freedom Fighters continues to use all the means at its disposal to distract from its legal woes. The situation is so bad, that it is left for the courts to try to rectify basic issues of governance. See, for instance, the [recent high court ruling](#) dissolving the Makana municipality for failing to carry out its constitutional duties to provide services to residents.

## The SACP

Amid the ruins, it would be nice if there were a party claiming more than 300 000 members with its own struggle history and rich intellectual traditions that offered an alternative set of politics and ideas in the absence of our national debate. This would be a great boon to our democracy, but the South African Communist Party (SACP) won't become this party.

The 99-year-old SACP's slogan is "Socialism is the future, build it now!", but it is hard to discern how it is building socialism and, even more damningly, difficult to tell what the purpose of the party is apart from providing jobs and nostalgia feasts for its members.

## Communist parties outside South Africa

Outside the booming communist economies of East Asia, there has been somewhat of a resurgence for the remaining communist parties of Western Europe in recent years. The Portuguese and Spanish communist parties are now important allies that helped to bring social democratic parties to power, together with other radical left formations. These parties, unlike the SACP, have been able to serve as a reliable check on any lingering instincts in these governments to embrace austerity and move to the centre.

The difference is that in these cases the communist parties are separate formations that run their own candidates and have their own programmes, distinct from the ruling socialist parties. There is evidence that there is still a place for communist parties in contemporary politics, provided they managed to move beyond Soviet nostalgia and embrace ideas that are not copied and pasted from the German Democratic Republic in 1974.

## The decline and fall of the SACP

This brings us back to the SACP: it has shown again and again since 1994 that not only has it failed

to serve as a check on the ANC but has also sided with the worst elements in the party for short-term political gain. The SACP was unable to stop the ANC from embracing neoliberalism under former president Thabo Mbeki by seeking out alternatives or building an alliance with the numerous community struggles and social movements — everything the party purported to stand for.

They can't say they were not warned. In 2005, Mazibuko Jara, one of the party's most promising young leaders, famously penned a critique of the party's embrace of Zuma: "What color is our flag? Red or JZ? In [the paper](#), Jara argued that the party's alliance with Zuma led to it attacking fundamental constitutional rights, aligned it with dodgy business interests and isolated the party from its mission of organising the working class, causing it to neglect or even attack the community and social movement struggles kicking off at the time. Anybody involved in these struggles, will remember the party's routine labelling of these movements as a "third force". For his troubles, Jara was hounded out of the party and, despite the accuracy of his analysis, the party continues to insist it was right to embrace Zuma as a "partial victory against local neoliberalism" in the words of now Higher Education Science and Technology Minister Blade Nzimande.

Let's take a quick survey of a few of the SACP's disgraceful antics during the Zuma years. In the name of ending neoliberalism, the party helped drive the woman who accused Zuma of rape out the country and went on to serve as perhaps Zuma's most loyal attack dog through most of his presidency. The party supported Zuma when the Guptas landed at Waterkloof, defended Nkandla and declared the fallen workers at Marikana "criminals". So loyal was the party to Zuma that it played a key role in expelling the National Union of Metalworkers and Zwelinzima Vavi from trade union federation Cosatu.

Nzimande and his comrades were more committed to defending Zuma from slights than building socialism. The SACP probably spent more time mobilising its membership against The Spear artwork than organising the working class.

The SACP eventually fell out with Zuma — as did Vavi and Julius Malema, his other "left" backers — and did, to its credit, contribute to his downfall. After the party turned against Zuma it recaptured a small amount of the goodwill and momentum it had lost, but rather than learning from their disastrous errors, its members chose to once again prioritise internal ANC politics over building socialism by backing a billionaire beloved by the Davos set for president, hitching their political future to Cyril Ramaphosa. As the party ruled at its last congress, "Our resolution and our organisation is not for sale. A good communist is in the African National Congress."

### **The most-hated politician in South Africa?**

This brings us to its leader (for life?), Nzimande, the Enver Hoxha of an increasingly irrelevant political fiefdom, who has been general secretary since 1998, leading the SACP from disaster to disaster. Is there a more despised figure in South African politics than Nzimande? The youth hate him for his mishandling of Fees Must Fall, much of the trade union movement hate him from his role in expelling Numsa and Vavi from Cosatu, social movement activists hate him for his many paranoid denunciations of them over the years — and these are only the natural constituencies of a communist party. I suspect the general public hate him for his bullying throughout the Zuma years.

### **Between neoliberalism and state capture**

While the party's official strategy claims to be positioning it as a third way between neoliberalism and state capture in the tripartite alliance, this is more a desperate delusion than a coherent plan. The party could have, as Robbie Kasrils suggested, tried to run as an independent party in the 2019 elections and probably picked up a few seats if it ran a mildly competent campaign — basically doing

exactly the opposite of everything the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party did. This would have marked a change in the terms of its alliance with the ANC and given it a stronger negotiating position. Instead, the SACP has tied itself to the fortunes of a president who does not need its support and has been mandated to deliver austerity and neoliberal reforms.

The hegemonic opposition to “neoliberalism” in the alliance is an even greater threat to the left, since it comes from a nihilistic mob of looters and saboteurs who justify state capture through the language of radical change. This faction is willing to burn down the country to protect its short-term interests: a case in point is the [prolonged sabotage campaign](#) against the train system in Cape Town. The SACP can’t defend Ramaphosa from this faction’s attacks and, at the same time, offer an alternative to neoliberalism. It has to pick a side if it wants to maintain any sort of access to power, a sure-fire way of ensuring its political irrelevance.

What then is the point of the SACP? It is not building socialism; it is not even building social democracy. It has been reduced to just another vehicle for people seeking jobs in the public sector, repeating tales of its glorious history and the revolutions of yesteryear.

I fear it is too late for the party to change course: it has become another yet another patronage machine. The party of Joe Slovo, Chris Hani and the countless others who dedicated their lives to ending apartheid and advancing socialism will die a slow death, endlessly promising the beginning of a second more radical stage of the national democratic revolution while the lights go off.

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