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Editorial

South Africa: Hands off COSATU!

Monday 22 July 2013, by [Amandla!](#) (Date first published: 11 April 2013).

How ironic that the attack on COSATU comes from within. Ironic, but not unexpected. Supporters of the Zuma faction in COSATU want to get rid of Vavi as he is too independent-minded and too critical of Zuma and the government.

Vavi has been outspoken about government's failure to implement the Polokwane resolutions and its continued promotion of neoliberal pro-growth economics; he has shown his determination to fight the predatory corrupt elite through the formation of Corruption Watch. His independence in working closely with civil society formations like Section 27 and pursuing popular alliances through initiatives like the COSATU/Civil Society Conference of 2010 drew great anger from the SACP and the ANC.

Faced by the majority of COSATU delegates at the October 2012 Congress, they did not have the numbers to oust Vavi and shift COSATU into a transmission belt for ANC policy. A false truce was called.

However, in COSATU's Central Executive Committee (CEC) they thought they had the numbers - hence the extraordinary attack on the General Secretary. Demanding his suspension on the grounds of alleged financial irregularity, the 'neo Stalinists' seek to put Vavi on the defensive and to remove him from the day-to-day running of COSATU. For the moment the plot has failed. Nevertheless, the struggle continues. A recent meeting of Presidents and General Secretaries of COSATU affiliates decided to set up a committee to facilitate discussions on complaints made against Vavi. Although this is a far cry from the inquisition that some on the COSATU leadership wanted, it provides a platform to keep Vavi on the back foot, especially in relation to charges of deviating politically and ideologically from COSATU's agreed positions.

But who are THEY? They are lieutenants of the SACP's General Secretary, Blade Nzimande, and of ANC General Secretary, Gwede Mantashe. Sdumo Dlamini, President of COSATU and current SACP politburo member, is one. He is strongly supported by NUM's president and new Chairperson of the SACP, Senzeni Zokwana; by NEHAWU's Fikile Majola, also a SACP politburo member; and by POPCRU's president, Zizamele Cebekhulu, a leading member of the SACP.

They believe that the path to power is through the ANC, no matter how centrist or right-wing its policies. They have consequently liquidated the SACP into the ANC - and not just the ANC, but the state itself. They are the most loyal and resolute defenders of ANC President Zuma, regardless of Nkandlagate or any of his other follies. They consequently end up defending the indefensible: the Secrecy Bill, the Marikana massacre, and even the Youth Wage Subsidy. They support the New Growth Path and the National Development Plan, despite the fact that the main neoliberal precepts that marked GEAR remain the foundations of these policies.

They speak of the national democratic revolution - by which they mean that the ANC is the true and only representative of the nation. Their so-called 'NDR' is, in effect, nothing more than a cover for a continuing capitalist dispensation, presided over by a new elite.

Inside COSATU they fight against class struggle positions. They oppose militant action against labour-brokering and e-tolls. They are the leaders of those trade unions that have bought into collaboration with the employers through social contracts, share-equity schemes, productivity accords and so on. Their personal lifestyles (salaries, cars, housing, private schooling and the like) are not too different from the lifestyles of top state officials and private sector managers.

But the attack on COSATU from within has been enabled and orchestrated from without. Zuma's promise of a left shift after Mbeki's neoliberalism has been betrayed. At Mangaung the ANC nailed its colours to the mast of its BEE backers - the Motsepes, Ramaphosas and so on. The adoption of the NDP with its pro-business policies requires an Alliance that does not rock the boat, that, in the words of the NDP, sacrifices or trades wages for jobs. But as Minister Gordhan has made clear in his budget, the outlook for jobs is bad. So, to please the rating agencies, the government needs labour stability and compliance from COSATU. COSATU is supposed to accept wage moderation, corporate restructuring (read retrenchments), special economic zones and youth wage subsidies without too much of a fight.

However, a major part of the working class is not willing to accept this. Twenty years after the end of Apartheid they are no longer willing to grovel for crumbs dropping from the table of social accords. That was the real meaning of the mine and farmworker strikes and the labour militancy of 2012. That was the significance of Marikana.

And substantial parts of COSATU, under pressure to deliver to their members, are no longer willing to suck in their stomachs and accept moderation. Even the business press cautions against sweetheart unionism. A Business Day editorial (12 December 2012) cautions employers against being happy with compliant unionism:

'Contrary to Mr. Dlamini's claim, the tendency of COSATU's leaders to desert the workers' struggle and position themselves for cushy positions in the government, or as black economic empowerment beneficiaries, is precisely what is weakening the union movement. Some elements of business tend to think that a weaker union movement is a good thing. Perhaps. But this is extremely shortsighted. The shop-floor chaos that can be the consequence of union battles is often worse than a strike-prone labour force, and nothing demonstrates that better than the Marikana tragedy.'

So Nzimande and Mantashe have taken it upon themselves, on behalf of the ANC leadership, to neutralise the militants in COSATU, to stop the rot and bring COSATU back into the fold. Hence Vavi is the first target of attack. Neutralise him and you arrest the drift of COSATU. And perhaps they have more significant targets in their radar. NUMSA, under Irvin Jim, has been a vehement critic of the Nzimande leadership of the SACP. He attacked Nzimande for taking a full-time position in government while remaining SACP General Secretary. He has come out strongly against the National Development Plan, labelling it as neoliberal and a DA document. He also was one of the few leaders in COSATU who defended the Lonmin strikers and condemned the police for the Marikana massacre. This has further exacerbated tensions between NUMSA and NUM, COSATU's two biggest unions. And it is these two poles that are at the epicentre of COSATU's internal conflict.

All progressive forces - those that still believe that, through redistributing wealth, we can fight the post-apartheid trajectory towards growing inequality, joblessness, poverty, corruption and authoritarianism - must unite to defend COSATU.

In respect to the attack on Vavi, we must say an injury to one is an injury to all.

Amandla!

P.S.

* From Amandla!, Issue 30. THURSDAY, 11 APRIL 2013 10:30:

<http://www.amandla.org.za/amandla-magazine/current-issue/1693-editorial-hands-off-cosatu>