

South Africa - The New “TINA”?: NUMSA and its United Front

Monday 17 March 2014, by [GRIFFIHS-DINGANI Kate Doyle](#) (Date first published: 3 March 2014).

“There is no alternative to discarding the theories and practices of capitalism, if we must save the Earth and its living systems. No amount of cosmetic reforms either in the centre of the global capitalist system nor anywhere in its periphery can hide the most obvious fact today: at a time when humanity has the most profound knowledge and technology, the world capitalist system of private greed risks all our lives and the very Earth we live on.”

“The State of the Class Struggle in South Africa,” Statement from the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), March 2, 2014 [[1](#)]

Following the massacre of 34 striking miners at Marikana in August 2012, a political and organizational crisis erupted in COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the ANC-led Tripartite Alliance. The recent statement by NUMSA in response to Jacob Zuma’s widely criticized State of the Nation Address both reflects and deepens this dual crisis. NUMSA’s call for political independence from the ANC and a “United Front” toward a “Movement for Socialism” is a stinging indictment of the “leadership of the national liberation movement,” the South African capitalist class (black and white), and the “stalled” transition to democracy that has left the black working class of the country mired in unemployment, malnutrition, illness, discrimination and, often, hopelessness.

The announcement is not merely “revolutionary socialism” or paper politics. If NUMSA can build connections among inchoate protesters, with new social movements, with restless and strike-ready workers across industries, and among existing trade unions, it has the opportunity to create the first nationally viable political opposition to the ANC. That it might do so on the basis of working-class and socialist politics represents a rumor and a hope that seemed incredible—in the sense of being beyond belief—to even the most optimistic forces on the South African left just two years ago.

Socialists have good reason to look on this development with interest and excitement. However, a close reading of NUMSA’s document elicits a note of caution. The authors place NUMSA as the standard-bearers of COSATU’s left wing—of lost revolutionary ideals sapped from the liberation struggle at the critical moment. Though it condemns the betrayal of the “property clauses” of the Freedom Charter by “ANC and SACP” leaders during the negotiated transition, the NUMSA statement doesn’t offer an explicit analysis of the causes of that betrayal. Nor does it consider the many subsequent moments in which various redistributive policies were abandoned and blocked in favor of policies that were more in line with Margaret Thatcher’s famous prophecy of a new neoliberal order, in which “there is no alternative” to privatization and free markets (an assertion later abbreviated as “TINA”).

But without a clear analysis of what factors lead to the betrayal and defeat of the South African working class of the early 1990’s, and the organizational, structural, and historical forces in play, NUMSA runs the risk of repeating that history. The focus on the redemption and resurrection of the ruined reputation of suspended COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi is merely one example of a top-down and personality-driven style of politics that mirrors the approach of the “old” (and the “new”) SACP.

The similarities and differences between Vavi's recent scandal and President Jacob Zuma's 2005 rape trial are instructive. In both cases, mainstream media and spokesmen for both "sides" have framed the issue as "he-said-she-said" and in terms of political opportunism. Zuma, of course, was ultimately acquitted of raping the HIV-positive daughter of a deceased friend, on the basis of "consent" (as determined by the court). Unlike Zuma's accuser, the woman who initially raised rape charges against Vavi later recanted, while Vavi admitted to an extramarital affair with a subordinate whom he seems to have hired for the purpose of proximity.

In both cases, the charges prompted a vigorous defense of the accused, complete with the usual sexist tropes about gold-digging, lying, female honeypots, which have received few criticisms outside of the world of South Africa's gender justice NGOs. It's easy to see how Vavi's supporters—and indeed Zuma's—viewed the accusations as politically motivated. What is less often considered by either "side" are the implications of so many powerful South African men having sexual relationships that at the very least reek of quid pro quo and sexualized abuse of power, in a nation with some of the world's strongest legal protections for women and for workers.

If the new South African left is to differentiate itself from the old South African left, a deeper reconsideration of movement, organizational, and institutional democracy is needed. It must avoid the pitfall of stopping at a reactive defense against selective enforcement, which reinforces misogynist stereotypes about the female half of South Africa's working class. Musing over the causes of Marikana, Vavi himself condemned the inevitable results of a top-down model of union leadership that elevates officials above the rank and file, finding a "social gap" between union leaders and members central to the discontent that erupted in the platinum mines in 2012. "Every leader stays in the white suburbs," he commented. "Their kids go to former model-C schools. When they are sick, they go to private hospitals."

Will the context of a "united front" provide the space and opportunity for democratic practices workshopped in South Africa's new social movements over the last several decades to influence NUMSA and the trade union movement? Partisans of working-class democracy in South Africa will pay close attention to this political challenge, particularly around the definition and deployment of "leadership."

Vavi claimed that workers want "new heroes." That much seems obvious. But what seemed less obvious two years ago was that South African workers already had them, in the form of 34 striking platinum miners who gave their lives fighting for dignified work and better pay, their families, and the thousands of activists who have taken up and extended their fight. They couldn't have known that they would spark a fresh hope for South African democracy.

Kate Doyle Griffiths-Dingani

P.S.

* <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4132>

* Some links are missing, but the link to the original article is not functioning at the time we post it online on our website. We'll add them asap.

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 31362), [The State of the Class Struggle in South Africa](#).