

The Crisis of the Left in Contemporary South Africa

Dale T. McKinley

Harsh Realities

The ideological, political, organizational, and socioeconomic realities of contemporary South Africa do not paint a flattering picture for the left:

- The neoliberal variant of capitalism is not only practically dominant but generally in a phase of ideological triumphalism, despite its recent setbacks;
- The state has rapidly become the "public arm" of a slowly deracializing capitalist ruling class (both bureaucratic and corporate). The African National Congress (ANC), which is in political and administrative possession of the state, is under the effective control of this ruling class and is fully committed to serving its interests. Despite the more recent growth of a crisis of ideological identity and political division, the ANC's own leadership layers, as well as those of its Alliance partners (the Congress of South African Trade Unions — COSATU — and the South African Communist Party — SACP) have become sub-agents of such class rule;
- The socio-economic position of the majority of people, but particularly that of the formal working class as well as those outside of formal capitalist employment, has worsened;¹
- Regardless of the growing legitimacy crisis of bourgeois democracy and its electoral system, no mass-based and national politi-

cal/organizational alternative has arisen either in relation to participating within the system of bourgeois electoralism or in creating the conditions for an alternative system of democratic participation and process outside of, and against, bourgeois democratic electoralism.²

- Despite their historical centrality to the struggle against apartheid as well as continued presence in both the ANC-led Alliance and independent sociopolitical struggles of the poor and the working class, left forces remain numerically small and politically weak, characterized by organizational sectoralism, disjointed resistance struggles and a lack of ideological confidence.

Besides the ongoing struggles of the organized working class for better living and working conditions, as well as those of new social movements and a wide range of community organizations around socio-economic conditions of existence, the dominant form and content of left struggles since the late 1990s have revolved around issue-oriented social and political struggles such as those that focus on HIV/AIDS, privatization, water, electricity, housing, the environment and so on.³ While these struggles are, in and of themselves, necessary and important, they contain little in the way of grappling with the demands, and actual forging, of a meaningful strategy of the left that has the potential to change radically the organizational and political face of anti-capitalist politics and struggle in South Africa (and implicitly Southern Africa).

Simply put, left politics in South Africa has become ideologically balkanized, and to a lesser extent, strategically and politically de-classed. To make matters worse, much of the leadership of the left has descended into the age-old morass of personal egotism, power-mongering, and political dishonesty and opportunism.

Roots of the Crisis

When South Africa's first ever one-person, one-vote elections in 1994 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the ANC, the majority of South Africans understandably celebrated the arrival of a new democracy. After all, the ANC and its liberation-movement allies were now in political control of the state thanks to the votes of those who had, throughout South Africa's modern history, been denied the right of institutionalized democratic participation simply because of their racial categorization.

Accompanying this, however, there still remained a broad-based expectation among the black majority — and also among large sections of the left — that the new ANC state would immediately begin to pursue a more socialist, or at the least radically redistributive, political economy. The basis upon which such an expectation had been built derived from the militant, mass-based political and socioeconomic struggles that had been waged by unions and community organizations (and supported by more radical NGOs) since the mid-1980s, alongside the continued socialist rhetoric of the ANC itself.⁴ As South African commentators Richard Ballard, Adam Habib and Imraan Valodia have put it, “As has happened so often in newly liberated countries, the euphoria of political transition led many to expect that the need for adversarial social struggle with the state was over.”⁵

Even if it had been long apparent that the ANC was never going to follow even a proto-socialist developmental path once in power, the bubble was clearly and publicly burst with the ANC state's 1996 unveiling of the neoliberal GEAR (Growth, Employment and Redistribution) macroeconomic policy.⁶ The organizational groundwork for this rightward ideological shift of the ANC had been laid soon after the ANC's return from exile in early 1990. Instead of supporting and strengthening the plethora of community and civic organizations (along with progressive unions) that had formed the backbone of the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, the ANC called on all civic and community structures to fold up and become part of ANC branches or to join the newly launched South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) which, it was announced, would become the “fourth” member of the Tripartite Alliance. Simultaneously, the ANC further formalized its political and organizational alliance with COSATU — and the main left political party, the SACP — by setting up numerous (consultative) Alliance structures and drafting key leadership figures into its electoral list for all levels of government.

Consistent with the sociopolitical thrust of GEAR, the ANC government also set about forming national structures to give institutional form to its corporatist commitments. The National Economic, Development & Labour Council (NEDLAC) was formed, in which “civil society” was represented by a “development chamber” (consisting of chosen non-governmental and community-based organizations), a labor component (consisting of recognized union federations), and a corporate component (consisting of representatives from capital and big business). At the same time, legislation was passed — e.g., the Non-Profit Act of 1997 — and institutions set up like the Directorate of Non-Profit Organisations (which required NGOs and CBOs to register officially with the state), and the National Development

Agency (“to direct financial resources to the sector”).⁷ All of this fit comfortably within the ANC government’s push “for a more formalised civil society constituency as part of a developmental model where formally organised groups participate in official structures to claim public resources” and where “the role of such organised groups is constructed along the lines of official government programmes, without space to contest the fundamentals of those programmes.”⁸

To their external discredit, leaderships of both COSATU and the SACP eagerly bought into the ANC “nation building” and “corporatist consensus” sales pitch (rationalized by constant reference to the Stalinist era-inspired theory of the “national democratic revolution”), thus placing the key components of the political left in a classic strategic *cul-de-sac* — in other words, into a situation where the pursuit and advancement of an anti-capitalist struggle is effectively co-determined by capital itself, and by a state already wholly committed to securing the core interests of capital. When, as they did throughout the better part of the 1990s, COSATU and SACP leaders tell the workers and poor that the best (and only) strategic option is to manage better their own exploitation, and hope that somewhere down the road it will lead to “socialism,” the entire meaning of what is “left” is put into question.⁹

The early sanitizing of the traditional and much of the previously organizationally independent left was only further reinforced by the post-1994 crisis of funding that confronted most community organizations and progressive NGOs, which were largely dependent on donor funding. Both domestic and foreign donor funding took a radical turn after the 1994 elections, away from previous commitments to independent grassroots mobilization and struggles, and towards state-directed “developmental” programs — such as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) — and state-sponsored social welfare “partnerships” with approved “civil society” organizations. The dual result was a “development agenda” increasingly driven by state and private (i.e., corporate) donor funding and the death of the vast majority of independent, and in many cases anti-capitalist, organizations.¹⁰

Cumulatively, these developments meant that by the mid-late 1990s the vast majority of what had constituted a previously vibrant and predominately independent South African left, rooted in broad working class politics and struggles and sustaining the hope of millions for an anti-capitalist transformation of South African society, had effectively been neutered. Whether swallowed by the ANC, absorbed into other Tripartite Alliance structures, hobbled by the co-option of key leaders into the state and associated corporatist institutions, or starved of financial resources, the bottom line was the

successful containment of the political and organizational terrain for active and militant resistance to the ANC’s creeping neoliberalism, elite deal-making and wholesale acceptance of the institutionalized framework of bourgeois democracy.

“Traditional Left”: COSATU and the SACP

It might well be argued (and indeed it has been), that the “transitional” presence of COSATU and the SACP, as part of both a formal alliance with the ruling ANC party as well as the “broad left” in South Africa, would translate into a collection of vibrant anti-capitalist forces capable of and willing to contest fundamentally the politics, policies and overall developmental agenda of both capital and the state.¹¹ However, the transitional reality has been that the acceptance of an unequal and essentially subservient political relationship within an ANC-dominated alliance — which is supposed to act as the political master of the state — as well as participation in corporatist institutionalism, has served to tie organized workers and large numbers of community activists with historic ties with or sympathy to the Alliance, into a false sense of ideological and strategic unity with the ANC and the state and, even if to a much lesser extent, with corporate capital.¹²

Unfortunately, for the broad left in South Africa, the SACP and COSATU have been fiddling with the same strategic and political choices since the beginning of the transition. First choice: to be junior partners in an Alliance they will never run and control (but might have key positions in), and thus practice a politics of offering critiques of existing policy implementation and arguing for policies that have a more pro-poor character or more state involvement; engage in occasional campaigns and activities designed to “show” that the working class is still a force to be reckoned with and simultaneously continuing to be part of an ANC electoral machine and to participate in an ANC-run state through its various institutional mechanisms. Second choice: to go back to the basics of organizing and mobilizing the poor and the working class (which means real, practical alliances with community organizations and new social movements) based on a radical program of demands for the redistribution of ownership and wealth that will act as an organizational and political base both to shift ANC government policy — not through insider bargaining and politicking but through mass mobilization — and to re-build a genuine left political and organizational power-base to contest power relations within South African society (something which is not simply reducible to elections and running as an electoral force separate from the ANC).

The problem is, however, that the fiddling has been just that — the second choice has never really been on the agenda. As a result, both COSATU and the SACP have continued to play the Alliance political game. While this has contributed to minor policy shifts and occasional genuflections by the ANC government towards mitigation of rising inequalities and poverty, these have not happened in isolation from the myriad protests and mobilizations that have taken place outside the SACP-COSATU nexus, and which have arguably been just as responsible for various policy shifts and the more recent rise in political contestation within the Alliance. Indeed, the ANC is probably more wary of service delivery protests and uprisings in poor communities and accompanying disillusionment with ANC rule (read: electoral abstentionism) than with the regular sniping and critiques of the SACP/COSATU.

The unfortunate but predictable result of these choices has been that the politics and practical work of the SACP and COSATU have become, over the last few years in particular, tied directly to what is going on inside the ANC-Alliance in direct proportionate relation to intensifying personal and positional power struggles. This is the logical outcome of such a political approach and it has effectively paralyzed the SACP's and COSATU's ability to organize and mobilize on a genuinely practical, pro-working class and pro-poor political basis, where their programs and critiques are actually put to the test in real struggles happening on the ground and in the arena of democratic contestation for power.

Confirmation of this state of affairs could be seen at the most recent ANC Policy Conference, SACP 12th Congress and the ANC National Conference at Polokwane (all in 2007), in the form of the dictates of the personal and political battle between the “camps” of the South African ex-President (and at the time still ANC President) Thabo Mbeki, and South African ex-Deputy President (and at the time ANC Deputy President) Jacob Zuma. The preceding mobilization campaigns and practical work tended to ape this contest (i.e., the degree to which it will, or won't, take forward the personal positions and accompanying politics of this or that camp). Revealingly, the person on whose shoulders so much of the fortunes, political energies and organizational decisions of the SACP and COSATU have been placed for the last several years — Jacob Zuma — is not even an active member of the SACP (and has never been part of COSATU), and has shown, time and again, that his own political inclinations are defined by what will take his own position and power forward.

Prior to the dominance of the Zuma-Mbeki battle, the SACP's (and to a lesser extent COSATU's) politics and organizational direction were largely defined by what Mbeki represented and was doing in government. This

meant fighting (or at least spoiling to fight) the pro-capitalist policies of his government and his political control of the ANC by positioning itself as a counter-Mbeki force within the Alliance and as the real inheritor and prosecutor of the ANC's “national democratic revolution” (NDR) legacy. The alternative — acting as an independent force with both a comprehensive critique of and a programmatic path to overcome capitalist exploitation and oppression as an active mass force of the poor — has never really seen the light of day.

Ironically, it is ex-Democratic Alliance politician and now public liberal intellectual Raenette Taljaard who has captured the essence of what emerged from the ANC Policy Conference, aptly calling it, “the shade of the variety of capitalism under a ‘developmental state’ banner.”¹³ The reality is that all the ANC (and by default, the government it presides over) continues to do is more fully to recognize that the reality of increasing socioeconomic inequality and political dissatisfaction among the poor represents a real threat both to its longer-term hold on state power, and to the organizational continuance of the alliance, which the ANC still finds extremely useful as a foil against the actual possibility of an independent left working class force outside of the alliance.

This recognition has, for the last several years, led to genuflective nods in the direction of greater infrastructural spending (although most of this has nothing to do with poor and working class communities, but much more to do with the interests and demands of corporate capital and the seemingly insatiable need of the political and economic elite for grandiose projects and affirmation from global elites that they are now real players on the global scene and can deliver things such as the 2010 World Cup); slight increases in social grants; relatively small increment increases in public sector salaries; and much more rhetoric about the need to discipline the “free market” and listen more attentively to the voices of the poor. This constitutes an astute politics on the part of the ANC — both in relation to the ANC's own chosen ideological path (i.e., a deracialized capitalism dressed up in the language of the NDR) as well as in relation to the ongoing personal and patronage conflicts within the ANC and the Alliance.

Thus, can the leaders of the SACP and COSATU make the incredibly suspect claim that the last two ANC Conferences were a “victory for the left” and that the politics that they have pursued over the last while has actually been the defining factor in this “shift,” while simultaneously claiming, for the benefit of the ANC leadership, that such a politics has been “sober and intelligent”? This is really just another way of saying that there was really no other option: i.e., that it is ludicrous to think about, or worse to actualize, either leaving the Alliance or forging a fighting program of the left separate

from the NDR-ANC-Alliance axis and testing its popular and democratic applicability with those they claim to represent. In the absence of another choice being contemplated, what we continue to witness is the repetition of the same mantra — namely, that the left in the Alliance has to “manage” the relationship with the ANC and now, given the supposedly evident shift to the left, even more closely “manage” the implementation of the developmental agenda.

Given this kind of politics, the question as to what constitutes the “left” is apropos. The SACP and COSATU have never been able to define, and still cannot define what this means because any slight seemingly progressive change in ANC and government policy that has occurred, or might occur, is interpreted as a victory for the left, precisely because to interpret it otherwise would be to undermine the larger claim and position that it is necessary and imperative for the SACP and COSATU to remain in alliance with the ANC; and also because any deeper and more realistic interpretation would undermine the entire theoretical construct of the NDR upon which the alliance rests, as well as the present political positioning of both the SACP and COSATU. The same applies to the SACP resolve, at its own 2007 Congress, that the state should lead macroeconomic growth instead of the market, without any meaningful discussion of what this concretely means in relation to the ANC’s ideological commitment (confirmed over and over again) to a capitalist macro-economy which the ANC-run state has practically led and implemented.

Because the leadership of the SACP and COSATU refuse to cut the long-standing umbilical cord with the ANC, the core of their left critique and struggle centers around contesting the character of the Alliance and ANC governance, not the systemic nature of the inequalities and injustices of the deracialized capitalism of which the ANC has long been a champion. A classic example of this is their attack on South Africa’s post-1994 “accumulation path,” where the critique centers on the particular character of this accumulation path (e.g., enrichment for the few and consolidation of the post-1996 “class project” in the ANC through use of inherited state institutions) — not the path itself. In other words, the two main traditional left forces in South Africa refuse to identify capitalism itself — and the capitalists who own and manage the means of production — as the core foundation of South Africa’s accumulative path. As a result, they have no other option but to propagate the idea that the sidelining of the individuals and selected class forces within the ANC-Alliance that are pursuing this accumulation path will then result in the possibilities of pursuing a different path.

In reality then, the core struggles of the SACP and COSATU have, over time, become a battle to cleanse the ANC politically and organizationally of its historic and more contemporary progeny: put another way, to defeat those who want their “fair share” of the capitalist system, as was so clearly enunciated by ANC Secretary General, Dr. Xuma, all the way back in 1945.¹⁴ This would mean nothing less than a complete political and ideological revolution within, and through, the ANC — something that is clearly not going to happen simply because certain SACP and COSATU leaders want it to happen and proclaim its possibility as the fundamental basis for their own organization’s strategy. If ever there was a classic case of embedded “entryism” then this is it (apologies to those Trotskyists who might still claim this tactic as wholly their own).

Through the transition, but even more so during the intra-Alliance battles over the last year, there has been much talk from the SACP and COSATU about completing the tasks of the NDR. But what are we to understand by the NDR? For SACP General Secretary, Blade Nzimande, “the basic aim of the national democratic revolution is to address poverty, unemployment, disease, restore the dignity of the overwhelming majority of our people through creating a mass driven democratic dispensation, remove all forms of discrimination and build an egalitarian society.” Further, “this means provision of minimum basic necessities, services and human dignity to all South Africans.”¹⁵ This is such a general definition that it can encompass (and celebrate) virtually any move to address the inherited inequalities of apartheid capitalism as well as any improvement (no matter how small or sustainable) in relation to basic services for the poor majority. It is because of this generality that Nzimande can then claim that

a key challenge therefore is that we must build an ANC (and Alliance) that consciously seek to build and lead a mass movement that is daily engaged with issues and challenges facing the mass of our people This should also be seen as part of the very important challenge of building the capacity of the ANC (and the Alliance) to exercise effective oversight on government and all our cadres so deployed (and to) defeat factionalism, patronage and corruption within our ranks.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, this “challenge” fits comfortably with the accepted understanding of the NDR among the traditional left: the NDR demands that those identifying themselves as left have no other option but to follow the strategic path set out by the SACP and COSATU (as the two main left forces in the

country), and any other strategic challenge is simply counter-productive, or at best, naïve. But, completing such an imagined revolutionary transformation of the ANC (just like the same in relation to the NDR and broader societal forces) is a practical, not to mention a political, impossibility, as long as the SACP and COSATU tie their own programmatic and thus political “path” with that of the ANC-Alliance. They have already admitted many times that the ANC is not a socialist organization. And yet, the entire strategic thrust is to try to transform the ANC (through persuasion, use of “working class power,” and, most significantly, positions in the Alliance and the state) from within, so as to then embark on a different accumulation path, using the self-same organization and historic politics whose entire *raison d'être* is to deracialize the accumulation path, not to change it fundamentally or to overthrow it.

What all this represents is a crisis of confidence of, and in, the SACP and COSATU at its most acute: a crisis of confidence in the traditional left’s ability to forge a political and organizational opposition to what it stands against; a crisis of confidence in the ability and willingness of its claimed constituency to embrace a political alternative to the ANC’s deracialized elitist capitalism, and to identify with the class lines and struggles that divide South African society so clearly.

The “New Left”: Social Movements and Community Organizations

Not surprisingly, the subjective politico-strategic choices on the part of COSATU and the SACP, alongside SANCO, have done little to stem the effectual tide of increased socioeconomic inequality and poverty.¹⁷ Indeed, it was the ongoing impact of such choices vis-à-vis socioeconomic realities that eventually saw the rise of a range of new social movements and community organizations from the late 1990s onwards.

Due to the implementation of the state’s neoliberal policies, massive job losses were visited upon those members of the South African working class who had been fortunate enough to be employed, the experience being accompanied by all the attendant social and economic devastation on already poor families and communities. To make matters worse, the state also implemented basic needs policies that effectively turned services into market commodities to be bought and sold on the basis of private ownership and the profit motive. This was facilitated by a drastic decrease in national government grants and subsidies to local municipalities and city councils, and support for the development of financial instruments for privatized delivery. In turn, this forced local government to turn towards commercialization and

privatization of basic services as a means of generating the revenue no longer provided by the national state.¹⁸

The logical result of these developments was a huge escalation in the costs of basic services and a concomitant increase in the use of cost-recovery mechanisms such as water and electricity cut-offs that hit poor people the most. By the turn of the century, millions of poor South Africans had experienced cut-offs and evictions.¹⁹ Similarly, the state’s capitalist-friendly land policies, which ensured that apartheid land ownership patterns remained virtually intact, meant that South Africa’s long-suffering rural population continued to taste the bitter fruits of labor exploitation and landlessness.

It was the cumulative result of such experiences, combined with the failure of the main traditional forces of the left, as well as civic structures like SANCO to lead and sustain counter mobilizations and active class resistance, that eventually saw the rise of new social movements and community organizations, at first in the main urban centers and then also in some rural areas.²⁰

From their inception, these “new” left forces that have emerged outside of, and often in opposition to the traditional left within the Alliance, have been largely ignored, treated with thinly disguised contempt and regularly actively opposed by the SACP and COSATU. As these social movements and community organizations have been subjected to a consistent state campaign of rhetorical vitriol and physical assaults, the various leaderships of the SACP, COSATU, and other ANC civil society allies have often given tacit support to the state’s actions, and have conversely failed seriously to politically support and to provide material solidarity to their struggles against the state’s service delivery policies and its suppression of political dissent.²¹ Ever during the numerous public and private sector workers’ strikes that have taken place over the last several years, there has been little, if any, effort by COSATU and the SACP around linking worker struggles for better wages and working conditions with those of poor communities for basic services and freedom of expression.

This rupture within the South African left is unfortunate, but not surprising. The hostage politics of the Alliance left, now defined more than ever by the embrace of individuals and factions, has virtually institutionalized this rupture precisely because the positioning of the SACP and COSATU demands that they play the role of organizational and ideological gatekeepers of left forces in South Africa. The practical goal of this is to control the “anti-ANC” politics and mobilizations of the new movements, so as to ensure that these social forces do not pose any ongoing or future threat to the dominance of the self-anointed left forces in the ANC and the state.

This is the main reason why the SACP and COSATU find the “new left” movements to be a problem, instead of seeing them as allies. While the traditional left appears to have no problem in throwing all sorts of nasty epithets at certain current and ex-ANC leaders and “class forces” (the shrillness and vitriol of which the supposedly non-Alliance “ultra left” has never approached), it becomes a problem when the new movements and organizations go straight to the real political reasons behind their anger with the ANC and the policies it implements through the state. It is precisely because the SACP and COSATU refuse to cut the umbilical ties to the ANC that they must adopt this wholly contradictory position.

It has been such an organizational and ideological gate-keeping role that has ensured that the possibilities of a united left capable of fundamentally contesting the state as well as broader power relations within society as a whole have remained stillborn. Despite their radical rhetoric, COSATU and the SACP have been at pains to stress that their opposition to state policies, and critiques of the ANC itself, are “not challenging the ANC” and have nothing to do with those of the new movements and their struggles.²² They have also actively sought to prevent their rank-and file structures and members from working with such movements. As one former leading COSATU figure has politely tried to rationalize it: “where we differ with our friends in the social movements is that we prefer to engage [the state].”²³ Dinga Sikwebu, a former leading official in one of COSATU’s largest unions also states the case: “The leadership and conservative layers [in COSATU] have something to preserve in the existing status quo ... COSATU gains something from the ANC — status and all the other perks ... whilst the ANC guarantees all those things, this relationship between the ANC and the union movements will always be there because they feed into each other ... these [new social] movements threaten this political relationship.”²⁴

Despite the obvious organizational weaknesses and politically incipient nature of the new movements, they broadly represent those who are actively engaged in grassroots struggles in opposition to state policies and for the basic necessities of life, and who pursue an independent, mass-based mobilization as the only meaningful and realistic option for resisting global neoliberalism and planting the seeds for an alternative to existing political party politics. While these movements do not represent some kind of homogenous entity, and while there has been (and continues to be) substantive organizational differences and political debates within their ranks, they have become inextricably bound together by the leveling content and common forms of the neoliberal onslaught.²⁵

Strategic Impasse

However, the new movements have their own Achilles’ heel. Even if differentially experienced, the combined characters and actions of both the traditional and new left in South Africa have produced the effective institutionalization of a left anti-politics, grounded in an essentially reactive, issue-based and personality-driven strategic framework as the best means to confront capital, “engage” the state, mobilize “the masses” and transform societal relations under capitalism. While this kind of politics can, and does, provide an ongoing vehicle for left activism, it can only go so far. It is essentially a defensive politics, and while degrees of such have been necessary, there is no ideological, political or organizational basis from which to move onto the offensive. As such, the South African left has been taken with continually fighting rearguard battles. This has, in turn, seriously obscured seeing and acting upon the possibilities for those implicitly anti-capitalist battles to give birth to more explicitly socialist politics, struggles, and organizational forms that have the potential to contest capitalist power on a terrain and on terms that are not reflective of the demands and needs of capitalism itself, as well as to forge a lasting left unity.

The question that the South African left needs to ask honestly is whether or not it still believes in the possibilities of actually overthrowing capitalism. This is not a rhetorical question or a meaningless ideological litmus test. There is simply no subjective basis for claims to left or socialist politics and unity if the struggles that take place continue to be directed into a strategic *cul-de-sac* whereby, once a certain critical political “mass presence” has been achieved, the strategic focus becomes beating the capitalists at their own game and on a playing field tailored by, and for, them (e.g., policy reforms or contesting elections). Just like the national liberation movements of the past, these tactics become, whether this is intentional or not, the strategy and any accompanying organizational form merely reflects the demands of this strategic choice.

On the other hand, the last several decades of left politics, in South Africa and globally, have also shown, quite clearly, that the strategic sureties of a classical vanguardism have failed, precisely because the presumed class consciousness to which such a politics strives has proven to be historically fundamentally flawed. For those in need of confirmation, we only have to look at the consistent crisis of socialism, of the working class movement, that is now almost a century old. The present crisis of the South African left is much more than simply a question of the recent “collapse of communism.” At its core, it has to do with preconceived and prefigured notions of the “working class” itself and a parallel mode of strategic thinking that fetishizes

a stagiist conceptualization of an ever-expanding productive base as the prerequisite for any fundamental change in sociopolitical relations beyond capitalism. In South Africa (as elsewhere), attempts merely to reconstruct the historically determined forms of vanguards — whether through accessing state power or through independent class struggle — have led, and will continue to lead, straight into political and organizational sectarianism and ideological absolutism. Indeed, a key part of the present strategic impasse is that there is no ready-made historical form for a socialist politics grounded in a dominant strategic vision and framework such as existed with nineteenth century Marxism.

In South Africa over the last several years, then, most of the left have tended to gravitate either towards an issue-based anti-politics (often strategically conceptualized as a struggle for “revolutionary reforms”), or to seek refuge in the arms of a classical vanguardist (and often entryist) politics. Despite verbal gymnastics to the contrary, left organizational forms and the resultant politics flowing from them have continued to be predominately conceived as, and cast in terms of, a “mass” versus “vanguard” framework. More specifically, the strategic debate emanating from these approaches has tended to revolve around the possible formation of a socialist “workers’ party” (usually perceived as being borne out of the womb of a COSATU and SACP break from the present ANC-led Alliance) and to a lesser extent, the efficacy of politically independent grassroots and community struggles entering the realm of electoral politics as a means to contest the capitalist policies of the present South African state.

The problem here is that an unnecessary strategic dichotomy has been erected between anti-capitalist mass struggle and action and the need and necessity for a socialist organizational form to give politically strategic expression to such struggles. Historically, the South African left has adopted a strategic framework that has assumed the sociopolitical character of those struggles and thus, the “consciousness” of those doing the struggling, as the basis for a politically predetermined organizational form. The all too evident result has been a marked failure to capture the political imagination of those most oppressed under capitalism and thus generally to limit consequent struggle to narrowly defined understandings of production and micro-material related socio-political relations.

A Way Forward?

We are now in an epoch in South Africa, and in many other places, globally, in which the struggles of the broad working class are increasingly, and necessarily, framed by an anti-capitalist spirit, if not content. While there

continues to be both activist and popular confusion over what exactly is, and is not, capitalist, it is quite clear that concrete struggles against, for example, privatization of the public sector and for socialized provision of housing, water, electricity, basic foodstuffs, and land are aimed at contesting capitalist relations of ownership and distribution. Given that there also continues to be much confusion over what constitutes socialism, it is all the more imperative for those that consider themselves socialist, not only to catalyze such struggles through practical involvement and varying forms of political impetus, but to win the idea, politically, that what is desperately needed or indeed demanded is the recognition and expression of such struggles as socialist. Meeting this challenge provides a potential means for overcoming the strategic divide previously mentioned, forging a practical unity among left forces and moving beyond what has become a somewhat stale and misdirected debate in South Africa around a “workers’ party.”

What is important in this regard is how the left understands the political character and organizational sustainability of the present ANC-COSATU-SACP alliance and thus, the best strategic approach to moving left politics and class struggle forward. It should now be more than clear that the alliance “ties that bind” are progressively weakening, despite what might appear as their strengthening as a result of the last ANC conference in Polokwane. This is the case precisely because the political basis for the alliance is itself being undermined by the strategic primacy of the ANC state’s pursuit of a deracialized capitalism (euphemistically referred to as the national democratic revolution).

The very basis, historically, for the maintenance of a sustainable political alliance between unions and ostensibly progressive political parties that have hold of state power is the parallel maintenance of both a politically malleable union leadership and expanding benefits for a meaningful threshold of unionized workers. On both counts, the situation of such an alliance in the South African context is taking serious strain and there is absolutely no reason to believe that this will be turned around simply because of a leadership change within the ANC or within the state itself. The ANC and the state it politically controls have already gone about as far as they can — given their strategic and ideological commitment to a deracialized capitalism framed by an overtly neoliberal macroeconomic policy framework — in relation to acceding to the basic demands of COSATU, the SACP and organized labor in general (e.g., the Labour Relations Act or the Basic Conditions of Employment Act). In fact, even those gains are now under serious threat of erosion.

What is also happening is that all but the most highly paid unionized workers gains are being seriously off-set by the erosive effects of the state’s

capitalist-friendly policies on workers' and their families' basic socioeconomic existence. This is particularly being felt in relation to the collective impact of privatization and corporatization of key state enterprises, public sector provision of basic socioeconomic services and needs such as water and electricity and the increasingly negative impacts of rising fuel and food prices.

Nonetheless, unionism is engrained, politics is not. What is therefore called for is a strategy that essentially forces unionized workers to respond politically to intensifying mass struggles from the very grassroots communities that they are also part of. As long as the struggles which are presently driven by the new left remain in the political shadows, unionized workers will feel little pressure to translate their own dissatisfaction with the political "delivery" of the ANC-led alliance into serious consideration of left political and organizational alternatives. What is needed is the (re)-politicization of unionized workers through the parallel socialist politicization and organization of those struggles. Here then, is the nexus of a political strategy that can potentially achieve what endless ideological debates, Union-Congress resolutions, limited worker strikes and marches, as well as the pre-figured formation of another political entity can never achieve — i.e., a clear socialist strategy and practical unity in action of broad working class forces.

What makes absolute strategic sense in relation to COSATU in particular, and organized workers generally, is for left intellectuals and activists to focus political debate and catalyze practical class struggles at the very point where the political connection of workers to the ANC and the state is at its weakest and most vulnerable. Unlike the position that has been taken by much of the left outside the Alliance, this should not be understood to simply mean that the key political task is to call for, and hasten, a COSATU and SACP break from the ANC in order to form a "workers' party." This approach plays right into the hands of the capitalists in the ANC, allowing them to successfully use the organizational appeal of historic loyalties and the political appeal of an unfinished national democratic revolution. It also mistakes political form for class content grounded in, and arising from, sustained mass and implicitly anti-capitalist struggles, not simply that of organized (and predominantly industrial) workers.

A more meaningful strategic approach does not hinge itself on whether there is a break in the alliance — it rather begins to lay the political and organizational groundwork for a new kind of left politics. It can do so by strategically linking the ongoing struggles of various layers of urban and rural poor communities with the struggles of organized workers, and in so doing, exposing the political and strategic sterility of an approach that seeks

to transform capitalism and an ANC that has embedded, and championed it, within South Africa's post-apartheid political economy. This can be a major step forward to a real and meaningful left unity (as opposed to the present state of false unity based on spurious claims to a de-classed, common national democratic revolution), both among and between organized workers and those struggling at the grassroots and community level.

In reference to such a potential unity, the left must also jettison what has been a very narrowly defined understanding of who constitutes a "worker." Workers are not confined to those who have formal employment (or, more specifically, who belong to a union), but also the millions of those who have worked in the "formal" economy (whether that be as industrial or agricultural workers) and continue to work in the "informal" survival economy (often erroneously classified as "unemployed", as if recognition of their work depends on "formal" measurement). To this must also be added the large numbers of domestic workers — not in the sense simply of those working for predominately white South African households, but all those — mainly women — who are just as much workers (reproductive labor) and who are not politically and organizationally treated as such.

The left must also put forward the absolute necessity of a strategic link between the revolutionary potential and power of those combined struggles and the forging of an organizational form that can directly and organically represent the political possibilities of extending ground-level struggles into the popular propagation of socialist demands on a broader, societal level. The more immediate struggle thus requires engaging in a battle of ideas, not merely through intellectual endeavor but through exposing the inherent weaknesses of present — or reworked — forms of left political organization (and this includes trade unionism) to act as the fulcrum for a renewed and relevant left politics.

In more overt programmatic terms, the basis for such a strategic approach should not be centered primarily around the need to provide electoral opposition, although this must always remain a tactical option. The point of charting a new left strategy is not simply to oppose the ANC on the electoral terrain that they now occupy in a still dominant but increasingly shaky position. Rather, it is to stake out that political and organizational terrain that they continue to ignore and take for granted — i.e., the mass of the broad working class in both urban and rural areas — as the grounding for a new organizational form for a socialist politics that has the potential both to unify practical left struggles and to contest on its own terms existent class power.

For the left in South Africa to move out of its present crisis will require a politically qualitative and organizationally quantitative advancement of the very real struggles of the broad working class, not predominately in the

intellectual and organizational capabilities of select individuals or in “capturing the heart and soul” of the ANC. The advance can be extended by taking the idea of, and debate around, new forms of left political organization directly into the heat of practical struggles taking place, and that are only going to get more intense. In this way, there becomes the possibility that organized workers and those in social movements and community organizations, through their own self activity, combined with certain degrees of intellectual and activist support, can prepare the ground for what can be a meaningful path to political and ideological independence. In other words, the objective conditions themselves are umbilically linked to the subjective will (and capacity) to sustain and intensify contemporary mass-based, anti-capitalist struggle.²⁶

Any serious left cannot but reject the philosophical, material, and class basis for the capitalist political economy being pursued by the ANC-run state. The main task is not to force the ANC to review what it is that they have fully committed themselves towards, although the struggle for practical reforms that impact positively on the daily lives of the majority must always form part of the tactical arsenal of a meaningful left. It is then our strategic responsibility to work towards a political alternative that emanates from and is grounded in the ongoing and linked struggles of the mass of organized workers and poor against the impact and consequences of capitalist neoliberalism and those who manage and control the institutional and systemic means for its continuation. Not to undertake this task is to condemn class struggle and left politics in South Africa to the realm of cyclical mitigation and crisis.

Notes

¹ There are numerous studies and reports conducted over the last several years that confirm this state of affairs. For example, see *South Africa Survey 2006*, compiled by the Institute for a Democratic South Africa, and reported in “Growing inequality in South Africa,” *Independent Online* 4 April 2006 <http://www.int.ioi.co.za/index.php?art_id=qw114416064258B211&set_id=1&click_id=13&sf=>; *Statistics South Africa* <<http://www.statssa.gov.za>>; Republic of South Africa, Taylor Committee, *Transforming the Present – Protecting the Future: Report of the Committee of Inquiry into a Comprehensive System of Social Security for South Africa* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 2002); South African Cities Network, *State of the Cities Report 2004* (South Africa: South African Cities Network, 2004); University of South Africa, *Projection of Future Economic and Sociopolitical Trends in South Africa up to 2025: Based on the Views of Business Leaders and Economists* (Pretoria: Bureau of Market Research, 2005); United Nations Development Programme, *South Africa Human Development Report 2003: The Challenge of Sustainable Development in South Africa: Unlocking the People’s Creativity* (Cape Town: Oxford U P, 2003).

² See Dale T. McKinley, “South Africa’s Third Local Government Elections and the Institutionalisation of ‘Low-Intensity’ Neo-Liberal Democracy,” *Outside the Ballot Box: Preconditions for Elections in Southern Africa 2005/6*, ed. Jeanette Minnie (Johannesburg: Media Institute of Southern Africa, 2006) 149-63.

³ The positive achievements of the new social movements and community organizations should, however, be noted. Over the last ten years or so these have included: placing mass struggles back onto the political and organisational agenda of the left that has involved a partial reclamation of the history and principles of liberation struggle; providing critical opposition to both the ideas and practice of the neoliberal policies of the ANC government and contributing to a deepening of the class and ideological divisions with the ANC-led Alliance; helping to create a renewed social, political and moral consciousness and solidarity around the most basic needs of life, both domestically and internationally.

⁴ Throughout the late 1980s and first two years of the 1990s, the ANC had consistently kept to its line that, once in power, it would nationalise key sectors of the economy, would set about a radical redistribution of land and wealth and would ensure that the black working class became the main ‘driver’/ controller of a ‘people’s’ state dedicated to popular/participatory democracy. The ANC’s adoption, in 1994, of the fairly radical, social-democratic Reconstruction & Development Programme as its electoral platform, served to further fuel such expectations. For a detailed exposition of the fundamentals of the RDP, see National Institute for Economic Policy, “From RDP to GEAR,” Research Paper Series (Johannesburg: NIEP, 1996).

⁵ Richard Ballard, Adam Habib and Imraan Valodia, “Social Movements in South Africa: Promoting Crisis or Creating Stability?” *The Development Decade?*:

Economic and Social Change in South Africa 1994-2004, ed. Vishnu Padayachee (Cape Town, HSRC Press, 2006) 397.

⁶ See Dale T. McKinley, *The ANC and the Liberation Struggle: A Critical Political Biography* (London, Pluto Press, 1997).

⁷ Ballard, "Social Movements in South Africa" 397.

⁸ Stephen Greenberg and Nhlanhla Ndlovu, "Civil Society Relationships,"

Mobilising for Change: New Social Movements in South Africa, Development Update 5.2 (2004): 32-33.

⁹ For an overview of the varying contents and consequences flowing from this reality since 1994, see Dale T. McKinley, "The Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Tripartite Alliance Since 1994," *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"*, ed. Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2003) 43-61.

¹⁰ These points are taken mainly from Greenberg and Ndlovu, "Civil Society Relationships" 30-31.

¹¹ Such arguments have been vigorously proffered by successive leaders of both COSATU and the SACP ever since the early 1990s. While references are far too numerous to list here, most of the key documents and speeches that have been made public over the last ten years or so can be found on the respective websites of the two organisations: Congress of South African Trade Unions <<http://www.cosatu.org.za>>, and South African Communist Party <<http://www.sacp.org.za>>.

¹² This acceptance has not been without its vocal critics within both COSATU and the SACP. For a detailed treatment of debate and opposition within the Alliance since 1994, see Dale T. McKinley, "Democracy, Power and Patronage: Debate and Opposition within the ANC and Tripartite Alliance since 1994," *Opposition and Democracy in South Africa*, ed. Roger Southall (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001) 183-206.

¹³ Raenette Taljaard, "Minor Shift in ANC's Thinking," *The Star* 2 July 2007. The Democratic Alliance (DA) is the official political party opposition to the ANC in national parliament (having the second largest electoral representation at a national level). The DA was born out of the coming together of the former Democratic Party (historically representative of the interest of English-speaking white "liberals" and white capital) and remnants of the post-apartheid National Party (which, prior to 1994 was the all-white ruling party).

¹⁴ In 1945, then ANC President, Dr. A.B. Xuma stated: "... it is of less importance to us whether capitalism is smashed or not. It is of greater importance to us that while capitalism exists, we must fight and struggle to get our full share and benefit from the system." Qtd. in Robert Fine and Denis Davis, *Beyond Apartheid: Labour and Liberation in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1990) 52.

¹⁵ Blade Nzimande, "The Policy Year: Reclaiming and Defending the Revolutionary Values and Traditions of Our Movement," *Umsebenzi Online* 6.1 (Jan. 2007) <<http://www.sacp.org.za/main.php?include=pubs/umsebenzi/2007/vol6-No.1.html>>.

¹⁶ Nzimande, "The Policy Year."

¹⁷ There are numerous studies and reports conducted over the last several years that confirm this state of affairs. For example, see those sources cited above in endnote 1.

¹⁸ See David McDonald, "The Bell Tolls for Thee: Cost Recovery, Cut Offs, and the Affordability of Municipal Services in South Africa: Special Report of the Municipal Services Project," *Municipal Services Project* (2000) <http://www.queensu.ca/msp/pages/Project_Publications/Reports/bell.htm>.

¹⁹ See David McDonald and Leila Smith, "Privatizing Cape Town," *Occasional Papers Series 7* (Johannesburg: Municipal Services Project, 2002), and Edward Cottle, "The Failure of Sanitation and Water Delivery and the Cholera Outbreak," *Development Update* 4.1 (2003): 141-66.

²⁰ Some of the main movements and organizations borne out of this period include: The Concerned Citizens Forum in Durban (which no longer exists but which spawned numerous community organizations that remain alive and active); the Anti-Privatisation Forum in Johannesburg (which continues to expand and now has nearly 30 affiliate community organizations); the Landless People's Movement (a national movement which went through a divisive split with its original NGO partner — the National Land Committee — and has since weakened but remains active in some rural and peri-urban areas); Jubilee South Africa (a national movement centred around debt, reparations and social justice issues, but which also experienced a split in its ranks in 2005/2006 which has since resulted in the existence of both Jubilee South Africa and a new formation — Umzabalazo we Jubilee); the Anti-Eviction Campaign based in Cape Town; and Abalahli base Mjondolo (a movement of shack dwellers mainly in and around Durban which has begun to link up to other shack dweller organisations in other parts of the country)

²¹ The most public expressions of the ANC's evident contempt for the new movements and their struggles was an ANC statement in 2002, accusing them of being an "ultra left ... waging a counter-revolutionary struggle against the ANC and our democratic government," and of siding with the "bourgeoisie and its supporters." [See ANC, Political Education Unit, "Contribution to the NEC/NWC Response to the Cronin Interviews on the Issue of Neo-liberalism," internal ANC paper, (Sept. 2002)] President Mbeki waded in soon thereafter by claiming publicly that "this ultra-left works to implant itself within our ranks ... it hopes to capture control of our movement and transform it into an instrument for the realisation of its objectives." [See Thabo Mbeki, "Statement of the President of the ANC, Thabo Mbeki, at the ANC Policy Conference," Kempton Park, 20 Sept. 2002, *African National Congress Homepage* <<http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?doc=ancdocs/speeches/2002/sp0927.html&type=Speech>>. Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in 2002, hundreds of community activists have been arrested, jailed and several tortured. See

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Simon Kimani, ed., *The Right to Dissent* (Johannesburg: The Freedom of Expression Institute, 2003).

²² COSATU, "Response to Sunday Independent Article," media statement, 7 August 2005, *Communist University*

<<http://amadlandawonye.wikispaces.com/COSATU+response+to+Sunday+Independent+article>>.

²³ Qtd. in Ballard, "Social Movements in South Africa" 249.

²⁴ Qtd. in Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi, "Pressing Challenges Facing the South African Labour Movement: An Interview with John Appolis and Dinga Sikwebu," *Rethinking the Labour Movement in the "New South Africa"* ed. Tom Bramble and Franco Barchiesi (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers, 2003) 224.

²⁵ For a more detailed exposition of this argument see John Appolis, "The Political Significance of August 31st" *Khanya Journal 2* (Dec. 2002): 5-9.

²⁶ These and other arguments are contained in a paper I presented to the 2008 COSATU National Political Education School entitled, "Towards a Socialist Strategy and Left Unity in South Africa."