

South Africa: unions debate forming new party

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The giant metalworkers' trade union Numsa has been campaigning for the labour movement to break with the ruling ANC and form a new working class party. Now union federation Cosatu is threatening its expulsion. Jeremy Dewar reports

As we go to press, the South African labour movement faces a historic crisis. Cosatu, the 2.2 million strong trade union federation that played a decisive role in bringing down apartheid, is on the verge of expelling its largest affiliated union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa).

On the surface, the dispute is about Numsa organising outside of engineering and manufacturing. But as Numsa has pointed out, 'virtually all Cosatu affiliates at some factory, industry or sectoral level do organise across industries and therefore stray into other affiliates' areas, but this 'has never been the basis either for admission into Cosatu or cause for dismissal'.

In fact, everyone in South Africa understands that this is a political dispute. Numsa's expulsion is motivated by its campaign to break Cosatu's alliance with the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP).

New party

At a special congress in December 2013, 1,200 delegates representing 338,000 Numsa members made this call on Cosatu and voted unanimously to establish 'a new united front that will coordinate the struggles in the workplace and in communities in a way similar to the UDF [the legal front established by the ANC while it was banned] of the 1980s. The task of the front will be to fight for the implementation of the Freedom Charter', the ANC's apartheid-era programme, and to struggle against neoliberalism.

The resolution went on: 'Side by side with the establishment of the new United Front, we resolved that Numsa would explore the establishment of a Movement for Socialism, as the working class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa.'

In short, Numsa has initiated a process towards forming a mass socialist party based on the trade unions, organising a Conference for Socialism next month.

This comes not a moment too soon. The last year has seen two huge mass strikes. The first was the longest strike in the country's history, a five-month long pay battle in South Africa's strategically important platinum mines, which won a significant pay rise. This saw many miners abandon the 300,000 strong National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), seen as corrupt and too close to bosses and to the ANC government, for the new breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), which now claims 50,000 members.

Numsa itself led the second strike in the manufacturing sector, involving 220,000 members. Again it was

over pay and lasted five weeks, achieving another partial victory. Clearly, workers are recovering from the shock of the financial crisis and the Marikana massacre, and are on the march once again.

When the media denounced the strike as being 'political', Moses Mayekiso, who led the union in the 1980s, responded that, if anything, strikes should be more political, and encouraged the founding of a new workers' party.

Alongside mass strikes, community struggles in the townships remain as buoyant as ever. In addition to boasting one of the best-organised and most militant union movements in Africa, South Africa also has heroic social movements, against the privatisation and extortion demanded by the ANC government's neoliberal programme. 'Struggle plumbers' and 'struggle electricians' regularly reconnect households whose utilities have been cut off by private corporations.

The latest campaign is against 'e-tolls' charged to motorists by the companies that maintain privatised motorways. A mass campaign of civil disobedience and non-payment, supported both by Cosatu and Numsa, has caught the public imagination.

It is these two sides of South Africa's working class – the disciplined, organised workers in more permanent jobs, and the militant township-dwellers who survive on the margins of society – that need a party to unite them politically.

Economic Freedom Fighters

Another development is the emergence of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), who gained 6.35 per cent and over a million votes in the May 2014 general election. This gave it 25 MPs, led by Julius Malema, the expelled former leader of the ANC's Youth League.

Malema has adopted the iconography of the US Black Panthers, with a self-styled 'Marxist-Leninist' ideology, military-style berets and himself installed as 'Commander-in-Chief'. The EFF's manifesto calls for the nationalisation of the land without compensation, and of the mines, industry and banks. These are burning issues; for example only 7 per cent of white farmers' land has been redistributed since 1994.

On closer reading, however, the EFF only calls for 60 per cent of the mines to be nationalised, for most industry to be left in private hands and for a state-owned bank to stand alongside the private banks. This 'mixed economy' model in practice always tends to offload the effects of capitalism's periodic crises onto the working class.

Malema also stands accused of harassing journalists, money laundering, tax evasion and accepting kickbacks from state tenders in Limpopo province. He openly admires Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, brushing aside criticism of his regime's killing of trade unionists and supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.

South Africa's working class does not need populist 'heroes' like this, but collective and accountable leadership. Many EFF members are undoubtedly sincere in their opposition to corrupt ANC capitalism; they need to be won to a united front of struggle against it, which will put Malema and his entourage to the test.

ANC's record

For 20 years, the ANC has presided over an increasingly unequal South Africa. 'Black Empowerment' has not increased the majority black population's share of the country's enormous natural wealth, only

that of the ANC elite.

The grossest example of this is Cyril Ramaphosa, who rose to fame as the leader of the NUM and has since become a board member of Lonmin mining company. He is currently worth \$700 million, according to Forbes Rich List.

Indeed, deputy ANC president Ramaphosa has come to symbolise everything that is corrupt and rotten about the ANC. The Marikana massacre in August 2012, in which police shot dead 34 striking miners at a Lonmin platinum mine, was a turning point. Ramaphosa's own involvement in it became clear from his words in a leaked email sent to Lonmin on the eve of the shootings:

‘The terrible events that have unfolded cannot be described as a labour dispute. They are plainly dastardly criminal and must be characterised as such. In the line with this characterisation there needs to be concomitant action to address this situation.’

Twenty-four hours later, 34 miners lay dead. Blood is on Ramaphosa and the ANC's hands.

Where next?

Cosatu's leadership will almost certainly expel Numsa this month. It might even expel its General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, another leading critic of the ANC. The trigger for the expulsions seems to be Numsa's collection of enough signatories from other Cosatu affiliates to convene a Special Congress to discuss and vote on the alliance with the ANC. So what should Numsa do?

As its National Executive resolution in response to the expulsion threat says, ‘the crisis in Cosatu today is in fact about whether or not Cosatu should continue to be a socialist trade union federation or it should simply become a yellow capitalist federation of the workers or a labour desk of the bourgeoisie’.

Workers do not take division in their movement lightly, but the blame for it here lies squarely on Cosatu's leadership. Far from retreating, Numsa must press ahead with its Movement for Socialism agenda, by calling a conference before the end of the year.

There are many questions yet to answer:

‘What kind of party do South African workers need? one in which leaders have all the power, or that demands full accountability and no corruption?’

‘What should be the focus of its activity? elections, or the struggles of the workplaces and townships?’

‘What should its goal be? a democratic South Africa, or a workers' state that can overturn capitalism?’

‘And finally, what programme should it adopt? one based on winning elections, or one that sets itself the goal of revolution, winning power through workers' councils? One that accepts the straightjacket of the capitalist state, or one based on smashing it and replacing it with the armed working class? In short: reform or revolution?’

These are exciting times in South Africa. Numsa – aided by all revolutionary socialists in South Africa and internationally – must keep to the path that it has bravely set out upon.