

The way to a workers' party

There are many political strands in the movement against apartheid. Although the ANC claims to represent the whole movement, it is challenged by Black Consciousness militants, socialists, and 'workerist' trade unionists. Anne Mack and Mark Dupont argue that the ANC has increased its influence in recent years because of failures by the left, which can still be remedied.

IT IS now some three years since the 'Vaal Uprising' signalled the start of the most momentous explosion of working-class militancy South Africa has ever seen.

In the three years since the residents of Sebokeng marched on the local administration offices to demand lower rents, much has changed in South African politics.

The African National Congress and its symbols — Nelson Mandela and the Freedom Charter — are more powerful and influential inside the country than ever before.

The vast, sprawling township revolt has switched from the millenarian rebellion of 1985, when thousands of school students really did believe that the regime was about to fall and so took to the streets under the slogan of 'No education before

liberation'. The sober reality of 1987 is lawless vigilantes, treason trials, hangings and urban 'upgrading' under the eye of the military.

The independent unions have grown to create the strongest labour movement that Africa has ever known. The ANC tradition has moved from the wings to the centre-stage of that movement. The forces of Black Consciousness have declined, and the 'workerists' have, in the main, kept silent. Populism is in the ascendant.

How did this come about? Part of the answer is to be found in looking at the way the debate between the so-called 'populists' and 'workerists' in the unions has evolved.

The 'populists' can be roughly defined as identifying with the nationalist political tradition of the ANC, which is today represented in South Africa by the United

Democratic Front. The 'populists' tend to favour a 'high profile' political style of trade unionism. Arguing that the workers must participate in wider community struggles, they try to build alliances with all progressive groups committed to fighting apartheid.

The 'workerists', on the other hand, though committed to the wider struggle against apartheid, are wary of alliances with non-worker-controlled organisations in which the distinct voice of the working class may be submerged. They stress the need for patient organising, educating and building on the shop floor.

Five years ago the 'populists' were a weak and isolated faction in the workers' movement. Today they are dominant. But populist ideas alone should not be given too much credit. The ANC has a large apparatus. It has funds. It has managed to portray itself as the symbol of a whole history of black resistance.

Even those factors are not enough to explain the rise to dominance of 'populism'. **The left has allowed itself to lose out. The weaknesses of the left have given the populists their advantage.**

The trade union left — who were strongest in the old FOSATU federation — tended to reduce all political questions to questions of organisation. In the FOSATU framework, once the working class was well enough organised and a strong enough base created, then working-class politics would dominate

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almost automatically.

The FOSATU left had a political agenda, and functioned in part like a political tendency. But they had one crucial weakness. They had a two-stage theory of *first* building a strong trade union movement and *then* moving into politics. This meant in practice that the building of political organisation and the development of socialist ideas outside the immediate process of production were postponed to a later period. In the early 1980s there was a political vacuum in the country, but FOSATU let slip a favourable opportunity to prepare workers politically for the tumultuous times to come.

The ideas of the FOSATU left took root in a relatively small but crucial cadre of union activists and shop stewards. The populists, however, were able both to appeal directly to the rank and file over the heads of the FOSATU left, and to exploit the lack of a wider political perspective on the state within the FOSATU left.

So, when the townships exploded in 1984, it was the populists, basing themselves on the ANC, who appeared to have all the answers to the big political questions of power.

The unions didn't know how to respond to the massive uprising. In part they were held back by a sectarian attitude to community organisations which were not 'proper' working-class organisations like unions. They were influenced by syndicalism — a philosophy which reduces the whole of working-class politics to trade union action. In the absence of a clear lead from the left in the union, the working-class struggles in the black townships — and they were *working-class* struggles, over issues like rents — were quickly subsumed and generalised into a vague and unspecified populist protest against apartheid in general.

Right from the start of the township revolt, the workerists allowed the populists to define the political issues. Very quickly this powerful, spontaneous revolt in the townships was fastened into the populist mould. There was no real living link between the issues around which workers and youth were mobilising — rents, fares, racist schooling — and the maximum goals attached to them, 'Free our leaders!', 'End apartheid!', 'Ungovernability!', 'People's power', etc.

The seeds of defeat and demoralisation had already been sown.

In part this happened because the trade union left had missed an earlier opportunity. The FOSATU left made political gains in 1980, when alone in the movement they recognised the importance of state 'registration' or recognition of the unions, and exploited to the full the new legal rights associated with recognition. They broke from the perspective long dominant in the ANC and, for different reasons, in the syndicalist wing of the

trade union movement — that all dealings with the state should be boycotted on principle. But those gains were not followed through politically.

There was no attempt to make further political demands on the state vital to the interests of the unions — for example, for the right to strike — or to extend such demands to non-trade-union issues like rent, local government and education. Lawyers were used — effectively in many cases — to widen the scope for legal action in the courts. Sometimes pressure was put on employers so that they in turn would put pressure on the state. But direct political demands on the state were not posed.

Even state recognition of the unions had come from the top down, as a state strategy for incorporation rather than as a demand from below. The FOSATU left had a golden opportunity in the early 1980s to break decisively from the ANC's idea that because the state was so rotten and could not be reformed, therefore no demands for reform could or should come from below. They had an opportunity to transfer to the political realm the lessons learned in the economic, to extend the method of patient organisation through pressing winnable demands on the enemy and linking ultimate goals with immediate 'small' reforms.

The FOSATU left missed this opportunity — partly because of the social weight of the populist view of the state, and partly because the syndicalism which informed the FOSATU left did not give it the political equipment to develop a working-class alternative.

In 1982 the general secretary of FOSATU, Joe Foster, made a speech about the need for a working-class political movement. He did not clarify what this meant programmatically or organisationally, and in any event his ideas were not followed through. The trade union left chose the road of 'union unity' and 'disciplined alliances' with the popular movement *instead of* building its own political wing.

The populists were against a workers' party. They were committed to broad national movements organised in Congresses rather than party politics; and the ANC saw the South African Communist Party as the sole representative of working-class interests. They could not be confronted sufficiently by a trade union left which was influenced by its own anti-party ideas stemming from syndicalism.

A workers' party — even a small and weak one — launched out of FOSATU in the early '80s, and armed with a creative approach to the township struggles, could have radically altered the course of events. It was not to be.

COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, was formed in late 1985 by the unification of FOSATU with some populist-led and other unions. This was a massive step forward. But it gave the populists a weight and influence

within the unions that they did not deserve.

In its first year, COSATU was held back by submerged political disagreements and infighting. While the populists organised, mobilised and conspired, the workerists retreated to the shop floor. They kept their heads down.

The left hoped that their stronger industrial unions would allow them to absorb the populists. That didn't happen. COSATU was formed in the midst of the fire and fury of the township revolt. That propelled it into a political tumult for which the trade union left was ill-prepared.

What was the trade union left's view on disinvestment? On sanctions? The ANC? Buthelezi? The 'homelands'? Black councils? For better or worse, the populists had a position, while the trade union left was groping in the dark.

Even as COSATU was formed, the township revolt was showing the first signs of decline. Confusion and demoralisation began to set in as the vigilantes — the murderous Black Hundreds of the South African counter-revolution — started to gain ground.

The ANC's slogan of 1985 had been 'Make the townships ungovernable'. This was plainly failing. Anarchy, not working-class power, had replaced the collaborators of the state, but there was little alternative on offer from COSATU.

Some trade unionists did try to deal with these problems. Alec Erwin, the national education officer of FOSATU and then COSATU, posed theoretically the need for a 'transformational' politics to build in the townships the kind of democratic structures built in the unions. Moses Mayekiso, general secretary of MAWU (and now of NUMSA), set out to build democratic and accountable structures in practice, in Alexandra township, near Johannesburg. There were other instances of trade union involvement in community organisation, though Alexandra was arguably a model.

The ANC also responded to the decline in the township revolt by raising the slogans of 'people's power' and 'people's education' in place of 'ungovernability'. It presented this as a further step on a triumphant road to liberation, rather than as a response to the problems of 'ungovernability'.

Some activists from the trade union left were able to play a very important role as the working-class wing of 'people's power', attempting to ensure that 'people's power' was democratically grounded in the people and not a cover under which one or another factor served its own interests or pursued its own ends. 'Popular justice', for instance, was made both more just and more popular than the ad hoc courts which had fingered collaborators and sentenced them to 'the necklace'.

Organisations like the Alexandra Action Committee represented wonderful ex-

amples of working-class power which will provide an inspiration for the struggles to follow. But major problems were looming.

First, state repression in the townships grew far worse. In May 1986 the Crossroads squatter camp was razed to the ground. The next month a new, national, state of emergency was declared.

On the surface, at least, most township organisations collapsed under the pressure, including the finest examples of 'people's power' like the Alexandra Action Committee. Militants like Moses Mayekiso were arrested or detained, while the state set up its own Joint Management Committees under the military to govern and push new resources into the impoverished communities.

The trade union left made the most of 'people's power' — except perhaps in areas like the Eastern Cape where its isolation from township protest left its fingers badly burned — but did not confront the limits of the approach as a whole. The idea of 'liberated zones' was a myth born out of initial gains by the popular movement and the initial slowness of the state to react. It was not backed by military force. The ANC's armed forces remained for the most part far from the clutches of the South African Defence Force.

Dual power in this context is necessarily a temporary state of affairs. It must either secure a new accommodation with the state, or overthrow the state, or fall. In the absence of forces to overthrow the state, and in the absence of a national organ capable of winning a new accommodation with the state — for example, democratically-based local authorities and education authorities, the freezing of rents, adequate financing of local authorities by the state, etc — it was a matter of time before dual power fell.

Second, the trade union movement, which had been partially insulated from the full brunt of state repression, was under increasing pressure in the face of unemployment, inflation, vigilante attacks and foreign disinvestment at the workers' expense. As the township revolt declined in 1986, strikes reached record levels which were then exceeded in 1987.

Newly-organised workers in the mines, railways and municipal services flexed their muscles. Older-organised workers fought for a 'living wage'. Often, however, the unions have had to retreat. The miners' strike was defeated. The July 1986 stay-away against the state of emergency was a flop.

Any defeat for the trade unions hits the trade union left hardest, and it would be totally wrong for the left to take any heart from the difficulties which the more populist union leaders, like Cyril Ramaphosa of the NUM, got into.

As the township revolt declined, the ANC started to put more and more resources and energy into strengthening its position in the unions. One expression of this was its campaign to get union after

union to adopt the ANC's Freedom Charter.

Those people, like the left in the shop-workers' union CCAWUSA, who obstructed the populists, found themselves on the receiving end of a classic Stalinist stitch-up. Critics of the ANC received dark threats and strong hints that they had been given 'a friendly warning...'

Some forces on the left tried to respond sensibly to this populist offensive. The 130,000 strong metal and car workers' union NUMSA refused to reject the Freedom Charter point blank. They backed the document as a minimum democratic programme, but also raised the question of a workers' programme and of the need for working-class leadership.

However, there were weaknesses in NUMSA's approach. Talk of the Charter being realisable only under socialism was confusing, especially as the mainstream ANC interpretation is that the Charter is *not* a socialist document and a broad multi-class alliance is needed for its implementation.

Further, many in NUMSA tended to

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confuse working-class leadership with leadership by the trade unions. That doesn't go far enough. A working-class political organisation — a party — is needed to ensure working-class leadership over the liberation movement, especially when the populists who are not committed to working-class socialism are so well organised.

A choice faces the left in the unions now. Either they will follow through and develop everything that is positive in the FOSATU experience and in COSATU. They will develop that 'independent working-class politics' that has been so much talked about but more rarely defined. Or they will let the populist politics of the ANC dominate completely.

The liberal capitalists whom the ANC would like to draw into an anti-apartheid alliance are bitter enemies of the working class. And the South African Communist Party's 'second', 'socialist' stage of the revolution would be a Stalinist hell, nothing to do with democratic socialism.

So how can the left face up to this challenge?

First, there appears to be a problem of organisation within the trade union left itself. At the recent COSATU congress, the populists were well organised and well prepared. They arrived with their speeches

already typed up. The left, in contrast, was in disarray. NUMSA failed to get a seconder for its resolution on political policy. This disarray obviously needs to be remedied.

Secondly, the left in the unions has had to look to and mobilise its allies outside the unions. This is a very positive development, since the battle inside COSATU against populism is a matter of central importance to the Marxist left as a whole.

Third, there has been a lot of talk of the need to 'build the revolutionary party', but no attempt really to build in practice a party for workers, by workers, and of workers which would link up with broad forces on the left of the unions to create a working-class pole of attraction in the liberation movement. The absence of a broad working-class political forum, in which Marxists would operate and seek to gain influence and leadership, has severely weakened the working-class movement, but can be remedied.

Finally, the limitations of 'people's power' make it urgent for the left to address strategic questions critically, in order to consolidate and defend the workers' movement.

For example, we believe that COSATU's living wage campaign could be strengthened by combining realistic and winnable demands on management for a real living wage for the best organised with a campaign aimed at the state for a legally enforceable *minimum* wage for the less well organised workers.

In the wake of attacks on trade unionists already waged by vigilantes, state police, mine police and homelands police, and the bosses' attempt to drive home their advantage after the miners' defeat, COSATU's calls for self-defence squads and solidarity action have become all the more urgent to translate into practice.

In the townships, some very hard re-thinking is required if the extraordinary breadth and persistence of the rent boycott is to be translated into lasting gains beyond the material benefit of not paying rent in the current period.

Neville Alexander, writing in *Azania Worker*, has pointed to the direction which some of that re-thinking should take.

"Today the policy and ethos of non-collaboration is so integral to our struggle for national liberation and emancipation that any hint even of talks with the present government raises the political temperature particularly of the youth and of organised black workers. I hope you will not see this last statement of mine as an easy cop-out if I ask: does this mean that the entire liberation movement is heading for the same cul-de-sac as the Non-European Unity Movement did, or is there another way?"

Whatever may be the appropriate strategies for the left to develop, it needs a democratic forum and a spirit of open critical debate to develop them in. ●