

South Africa: left fights for right to strike and right to work

Bobby Navarro writes
from South Africa

THE MOVING images of South African workers queueing for hours, in some cases for over a day, in blistering heat to vote last year are still fresh in the memory. How can it be, then, that the mood of optimism and hope has turned so sour, so soon?

At the beginning of May Nelson Mandela celebrated the anniversary of his inauguration as President. It is just over a year since his African National Congress [ANC] won the first free non-racial elections in South Africa with 63% of the vote. The deaths of over a hundred gold miners in the worst mining accident for a decade cast a shadow over the proceedings. But there was little mood of celebration even before this tragedy occurred. Few people attended the celebrations of 'Freedom Day' laid on all across the country.

Last year the South African workers, whose struggles in the 1980s frightened the white racist apartheid bourgeoisie into dismantling apartheid and granting majority rule, turned out in their millions to vote for a party committed to ruling with the white racist apartheid bourgeoisie. That is what the ANC, for all its links to the workers' movement and its overwhelming support among black workers, represents. The same black workers are starting to see that the election of a black-led government has not changed anything fundamental in South Africa. In economic terms the whole *purpose* of electing a black government was to make sure that the system which has oppressed millions for so long could continue, reformed, developed, more competitive, modern but, still, oppressing millions.

One year on, little or nothing has changed for the vast majority of black workers and expectations of change are also low. The "New South Africa" is the same old capitalist system dressed in a new "anti-racist" suit.

The so-called Government of National Unity [GNU] includes all those parties which got over 10% support in the elections. Thus the ANC governs with the help of the National Party, the Democratic Party and with some of the most prominent figures in the old racist regime. They govern with the old apartheid civil service, police force and military intact — guaranteed jobs under the "sunset clause."

Even accounting for the participation of this right wing, the GNU has exceeded the bosses' hopes for its compliance with capitalist orthodoxy.

The ANC earned praise from the bourgeois press when it dropped a paper commitment in the Freedom Charter to nationalisation. Other evidence cited for the ANC abandoning 'socialism' includes its enthusiastic support for monetarist policies, wage restraint and privatisation. ANC and GNU strategy for developing the South African economy is to depress wage levels, making South African goods more competitive in the world market. So they promote 'industrial harmony' — that is, they clamp down on industrial militancy, especially around wage claims. They even talk of tax cuts for the rich — businesses have already received generous tax cuts from the GNU.

At the same time the ANC-led alliance parties are hyping the main plank of their commitment to a New South Africa free from the injustices of apartheid — the Reconstruction and Development Plan [RDP]. The aim of the Plan, they say, is to aid development through a programme of education, house-building, electrification and job creation.

Yet the RDP has had to rely on World Bank loans, private sector capital and on growth for finance, when only a tax on wealth could raise the funds to make it happen.

Indeed, the government presents the RDP as a *partnership* with capitalism for the building of a new nation. The bosses are keen to participate in a programme that "offers plenty of scope for fair profit" (Jay Naidoo, former General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions [COSATU], now in charge of the RDP), but only do so on their own terms. Barlow Rand, one of the biggest South African companies, described the RDP as "a carcass off which business can feed for years."

The Workers' List Party [WLP], who stood for independent working-class politics in the elections a year ago, estimate the cost of delivering the main objectives of the RDP at R40 billion (£7 billion):

Free milk for children	R2bn
Safe drinking water	R4bn
Rural development	R5bn
Housing/nurseries	R12bn
Healthcare	R5bn
Education	R4bn
Public transport	R4bn
Electrification	R4bn

Spending money on this would save South African children from malnutrition and disease, build homes, provide a launchpad and hope for the impoverished black majority. Delivering these services would provide badly needed jobs: more than 40% of black South Africans are unemployed.

The GNU has other priorities: repaying to the international banks debts incurred by the apartheid regime (R35 billion per year), buying new battleships for the navy (R3.2 billion).

A fight for the reforms promised in the RDP is important, although it's equally important to reject the strategy of which it forms part — building thriving capitalism in South Africa.

Apartheid was a creation of capitalism and while real power in South Africa remains with the old apartheid bosses, its legacy cannot be addressed.

The government's path is becoming increasingly thorny.

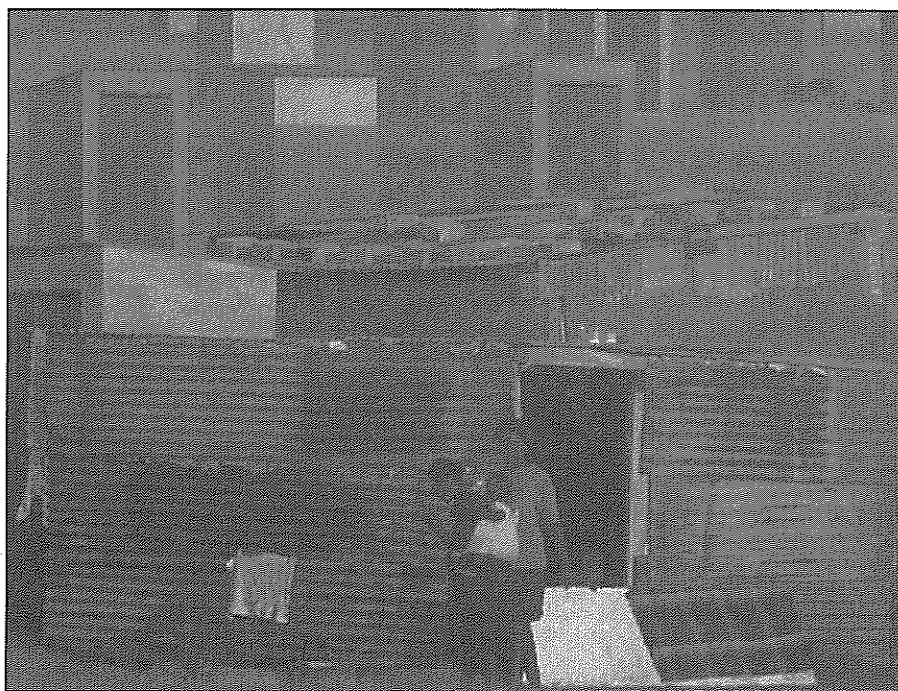
In KwaZulu-Natal, base of the Inkatha Freedom Party, Chief Buthelezi has called on Zulus to rise up and resist the central government. This has led to an escalation of political violence. The recent embarrassing Winnie Mandela saga resulted from the government's poor record. Winnie was sacked for attacking the government!

The growing disillusionment is, perhaps, demonstrated by the slowness of registration for voting in local elections — registration time had to be extended, as only 30% of the electorate had registered by the deadline.

The ANC and its supporters in the South African Communist Party [SACP] and COSATU offer three main arguments in defence of their record.

They claim the old civil service has obstructed reconstruction and progress. They say the world economic situation has constrained prospects for growth in the South African economy. Lastly, and increasingly, they accuse workers of making unrealistic demands. In fact, the plans increasingly call for workers to pay for reconstruction through wage restraint — but why should workers start paying money for services they have not yet received? And workers *need* to make pay demands. Inflation for workers is much higher than the official levels.

But more scapegoating of workers will surely follow. The GNU and media have scapegoated immigrants — Mozambican miners have been forced out of the country. And some members of the GNU have



ANC election promises included building a million homes — to date they have built fewer than 10,000. Millions remain inadequately housed.

hinted that the press is abusing its freedom when it attacks the government.

The left has become a scapegoat, with attacks on the "minority wearing the mask of anarchy." Everyone is responsible except those responsible, the government.

All of this points to the future sites of conflict and repression in the coming period of increased class struggle.

So far the ANC has kept the support of the workers with the aid of COSATU and the SACP. The RDP formed the core of a pact between COSATU, the SACP and the ANC in the run-up to the elections. Strains are now developing in this alliance as the interests of the capitalist state and the ANC government clash with those of workers organised in COSATU, and the RDP is clearly not implemented.

All three partners suffered organisationally by the loss of their top cadre to responsibilities in government. The ANC has been plagued by internal problems. At grass roots most of their branches and the youth structure have all but collapsed — it is now very hard for the ANC to get its line across to communities and workers. Increasingly they are relying on Mandela's personal prestige to hold the organisation together. Sacking Winnie Mandela, and attacks on other 'populists', represent a move by the capitalist class to make the ANC a fully stable and reliable party of government in time for the 1999 elections, when Mandela will not be a candidate for president.

The SACP has slavishly defended the anti-working class policies of the GNU. Joe Slovo's death weakened the SACP at a crucial time, although it has increased its membership to over 75,000. Recent attempts by left elements in the Western Cape SACP to rebuild the structures have largely flopped. The current line of the SACP is that the quickest and most direct route to socialism is to build the RDP.

COSATU is becoming more and more bureaucratic. The GNU places the COSATU leadership in a very difficult position, trying to justify government attacks on workers while representing their members.

The highway blockade by the transport workers' union Turning Wheel last October might have been a turning point in the situation [see interview in *Workers' Liberty* 20]. It was the first national militant action against the GNU by workers. Turning Wheel, a split from the COSATU-affiliated TGWU, seems to have caused a change of direction and increased the militancy of the workers. Many trade unions are looking for a clear alternative to this government.

The current situation is characterised by isolated strikes and demonstrations and threats of action by various unions. Health workers, teachers, students, transport workers, policemen and women have been in dispute in the last year. What these disputes lack is a national focus, and left leadership in the unions.

NUMSA [National Union of Miners of South Africa] failed to gain a seconder for its proposal to break the "triple alliance" at COSATU congress in November last year, but it is the focus of a growing mood of discontent within the unions.

Against this background and before resistance to the government grows any bigger the GNU has introduced a new labour bill — the Labour Relations Bill [LRB] — aimed at tying the unions into a social contract arrangement: negotiations in a new corporatist forum will 'replace' the need for workers' industrial action.

The Bill provides for a limited right to strike, the establishment of 'workplace forums' of bosses and workers, and a new system of non-compulsory bargaining.

The right to strike would be bound in a tight legal framework. Bosses would have the right to employ scabs, and to lock out workers; they could sack striking workers

if they faced bankruptcy (that is, if the strike were effective!). The Bill would ban strikes against lay-offs; and in essential or maintenance services (where a strike could damage the machinery in a plant for example). A strike on any issue that can be referred to arbitration or the Labour Court would be illegal.

'Workplace forums' would not have any direct union input, and would be used by the bosses to promote non-unionism. Workplace forum reps would get time off for training, and support in their role as a representative — rights denied shop stewards.

Bosses would not be obliged to bargain.

Thus the Bill ignores the key demands of the Workers' Charter, developed by COSATU in the late 1980s. In return for 'social peace' there will be very little reward for the workers.

Many COSATU officials oppose the LRB. The official COSATU position is that the Bill is a step forward and the limitations can be worked on within the GNU, as time passes. But the Chemical Workers Industrial Union is beginning a major campaign for industry-wide bargaining — the first major test of strength between a COSATU union and the bosses since the GNU was formed, and a direct challenge to the proposed legislation.

Workers are responding well to the campaign against the Bill. This will increase as more and more workers learn the Bill's real content. The campaign gives the left a vital opportunity to draw a class line between organised labour and the government, and to make the case for a workers' party.

The Campaign for the Right to Work provides another opportunity for the left. The campaign is centred on the draft constitution which includes the right to private property but not the right to work. The Workers' List Party has submitted an amendment to the constitution. A high profile campaign on this issue will attract those rank and file workers who expected the ANC-led government to organise a jobs programme.

Of course, to make the best of these openings, the left has some recovering to do. Just as the unions have been weakened by the mood of confusion and lack of leadership, so too has the left. The Workers' List Party has attracted much media coverage by its consistent defence of working-class interests against the GNU but it has not grown at the rate expected after the elections. Campaigns around the LRB and the right to work, initiated by the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action and by the WLP, will be crucial to channeling debate towards independent working-class politics.

The next few months will be critical to the long-term development of South African politics. If the ANC traps COSATU into a social contract we will see in the future a long and bitter struggle inside COSATU.

If the left can unite in action around campaigns based on the Workers' Charter and workers' interests, they can turn the mood of discontent into a struggle against the capitalist government, for the ending of the miserable legacy of apartheid and toward a struggle for socialism. ■