

Étreinte persistante : la COSATU et l'Alliance tripartite durant l'ère Zuma

Devan Pillay

Résumé

Depuis que le Congrès national africain (ANC) et le Parti communiste sud-africain (SACP) ont officiellement invité la Confédération des syndicats sud-africains (COSATU) à former avec eux une alliance tripartite en 1990, afin de poursuivre leur stratégie de « révolution démocratique nationale », le robuste « syndicalisme de transformation sociale » de la COSATU s'est graduellement transformé en une forme plus restreinte de « syndicalisme politique » encadré par le parti. La COSATU a maintenu son autonomie et a continué à contester certaines politiques de travail, mais ne s'est pas risquée à forger des liens avec des mouvements sociaux hostiles à l'ANC. Elle n'a eu, en outre, que peu d'influence sur les politiques de l'ANC. Au lieu de bâtir un projet alternatif antihégémonique de gauche, la Confédération a choisi de « grossir les rangs » de l'ANC pour soutenir la faction Jacob Zuma, aidant celui-ci à accéder au pouvoir en tant que président de l'ANC en 2007, et en tant que président du pays en 2009. Malgré certaines indications d'une transition vers un état plus interventionniste, l'ANC demeure fondamentalement ancré dans une politique économique conservatrice. La COSATU a ressuscité certains éléments de son « syndicalisme de transformation sociale » d'antan, en coexistence schizophrène avec l'étroitesse de son « syndicalisme politique ». Le présent article explore ces développements dans le contexte de la trajectoire historique de la COSATU, pour conclure que malgré les apparences, rien ne change. L'inconfortable étreinte entre l'ANC et la COSATU persistera encore quelque temps mais il est possible cependant que les politiques de l'ANC finissent par provoquer une vraie rupture.

The Enduring Embrace: COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance during the Zuma era

Devan Pillay¹

Abstract

Since 1990, when the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) formally drew the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) into a Tripartite Alliance in pursuit of their strategy of “national democratic revolution”, the federation has gradually moved from a more robust “social movement unionism” towards a narrower form of party-led “political unionism”. While retaining its independence and continuing to engage in policy contestation on issues inside and outside the workplace, COSATU has not dared to push the envelope too far, and forge links with social movements antagonistic toward the ANC. Nor has it had much success in shaping ANC policy. Rather than build an alternative counter-hegemonic Left project, COSATU has chosen to “swell the ranks” of the ANC, and support the Jacob Zuma-ANC faction, helping usher Zuma into power as ANC president in 2007, and as South African president in 2009. Despite some indications of a move towards a more interventionist “developmental state”, the ANC remains basically committed to a conservative economic policy. This, plus rising inequality, widespread poverty, unemployment and corruption, and ANC threats to civil liberties, has increased tensions between COSATU and the ANC, as well as with the SACP (which backs Zuma unconditionally). COSATU has revived elements of its historical “social movement unionism”, but this co-exists schizophrenically with its narrower “political unionism”. This article discusses these developments within the context of COSATU’s historical trajectory, and concludes that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Although the ANC’s uncomfortable embrace of COSATU will endure for some time to come, it is possible that ANC policies might eventually spur a real break.

Introduction

Over the last five years, COSATU's increasingly strident criticisms of the ANC government, and its flirtations with organs of civil society critical of the Tripartite Alliance, suggests a return to the more vibrant form of "social movement unionism" that characterized this workers' movement during the 1980s. Unlike a narrower "political unionism" where trade unions are subordinate to political parties, "social movement unionism" evokes the origins of working class movements as expansive, vibrant, independent and democratic formations that allied with other organizations to defend the broader working class and transform the capitalist system.

In 1990 COSATU became part of a triple alliance with ANC and SACP. Left critics argue that it degenerated into "political unionism" as a junior partner wedded to the pursuit of the ANC/SACP's strategy of "national democratic revolution". COSATU was accused of dropping all notions of workers' control at the workplace, in favour of union leaders and officials participating in corporatist forums such as the National Economic, Labour and Development Council (NEDLAC). This only served to deepen oligarchic tendencies within the affiliates, as shop stewards became less and less empowered in the union. In addition, the symbiotic nature of the federation's insertion into the Alliance enmeshed it in networks of patronage, where union officials at the local, provincial and national level all vie for state tenders, or positions in government. Critics argue the end result of such incorporation has been a Left cover for a "black bourgeois nationalist" project – a far cry from the substantive-democratic socialist discourse of the 1980s.

However, COSATU insisted that it remained committed to social movement unionism², and pointed to its jealously guarded independence, and its opposition to neo-liberalism and privatization during the President Thabo Mbeki era that began in 1999. This involved a number of massive stayaways; on-going strike action in support of wage demands, including major public sector strikes; support for the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) against Mbeki's AIDS denialist policy; vigorous opposition to Mbeki's Zimbabwe policy³ and its participation in a coalition campaigning for the introduction of a Basic Income Grant (BIG), amongst other things.

As relations with the Mbeki-led ANC worsened, COSATU and the SACP had a choice of either building a counter-hegemonic working class movement outside the Alliance, or rebuilding a

proletarian presence within the ANC, to return the liberation movement to its supposed “working class bias”. It chose the latter, deciding to “swell the ranks” of the ANC with working class activists so that the party could be made more pro-worker. In practice, this meant COSATU’s strident support for tainted former deputy president Jacob Zuma for the ANC presidency, in a coalition with the SACP and ANC Youth League (ANCYL). Left critics have seen this as a lost opportunity to return the federation to its “social movement union” roots.

The pro-Zuma coalition was an amalgam of opposing class forces that began to unravel soon after the heady success at the ANC’s Polokwane Conference in December 2007, when Zuma became ANC president, on the way to becoming the country’s President in 2009 (see Pillay, 2008).

On the one hand were the working class allies, the SACP and COSATU, which ostensibly have a long-term interest in a “socialist” developmental path. On the other hand there was a faction of the aspirant black bourgeois class that felt marginalized by the Mbeki regime’s network of patronage. This faction has been closely tied to the ANCYL and its controversial president Julius Malema, using militant, racialized rhetoric that feeds off the disgruntlement of the country’s black working class youth, mired in poverty and unemployment, in the context of rising inequality and conspicuous consumption by the still-dominant white economic elite⁴. Rather than oppose capitalism, this faction holds up its own conspicuous consumption as a model for black youth, while using a militant nationalist discourse (*à la* Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe) in its call for nationalization of the commanding heights of the economy and rapid land re-distribution, in the name of “economic freedom in our lifetime”.

The divide, however, is not simply between the organized working class and the ANCYL-linked “lumpen bourgeoisie”, or what the SACP calls a “new tendency” of “tenderpreneurs” i.e. those who profit from corrupt access to government tenders. The champions of the working class are also at loggerheads with each other, with the SACP unconditionally backing president Zuma, and COSATU increasingly critical of the Zuma government’s reported (and often admitted) widespread corruption, conservative macro-economic policy, threats to civil liberties and inability to address rising unemployment and inequality.

For the first time since 1990, COSATU has dared to court civil society actors critical of the Alliance, in defiance of the ANC and SACP. However, it has thus far stopped short of embracing a new formation, the Democratic Left Front, comprising former SACP leaders and independent Left groups. Instead, it continues to offer the ANC full support during elections, and is in danger of becoming internally divided over the issue of support for a further term for Zuma as ANC president in the run-up to the ANC's December 2012 National Congress in Mangaung (Bloemfontein).

Is COSATU edging back towards its more robust social movement union roots, or is it still too enmeshed in patronage politics, and the mystical allure of the national liberation movement, to break free from the ANC's enduring embrace?

The Rise and Decline of Social Movement Unionism in South Africa

At its inception in 1985, COSATU exemplified popular-democratic, transformative “social movement unionism”, where democratically organized workers engaged in both workplace politics, including democratic shop-floor organization, as well as state-power politics, which involved addressing community and state-political issues, and explicit alliances with community and political organizations (but based on principles of mutual independence). This represented a merger of two broad non-racial currents within the union movement, namely those labelled “workerist” and “populist” (with the racially exclusive Africanist and Black Consciousness unions going on to form the much smaller National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU)).

For SACP and ANC activists “workerism” supposedly involved an “over-emphasis” on class, whether in the narrow form of “economism” (i.e. business unionism), or a broader “syndicalism” that eschewed alliances with political parties, and saw the union movement as the primary vehicle of working class politics. In their view, the unions needed to be led by the ANC and SACP to avoid such errors. Those who advocated an independent workers’ party in opposition to the SACP were also labelled workerist. On the other hand many unionists labelled those who “over-emphasized” the struggle against racial domination, to the exclusion of the class struggle against capitalism, as “populist”. In their view, the unions

needed to retain their independence while taking a Left political position. The popular-democratic synthesis sought a balance between the anti-apartheid and the anti-capitalist struggles, recognizing that while they were intertwined, they were also separable. The 1987 adoption of the ANC's Freedom Charter as a "stepping stone to socialism" by COSATU further entrenched this "strategic compromise", which recognized both the increasing popularity of the ANC-SACP alliance, as well as a strong belief in the necessity of the independence of the labour movement (Pillay, 2008).

Independent socialists who continued to be wary of the SACP for its "Stalinist" history and subordination to the ANC's black nationalism drew some comfort from the fact that working class power was rising during the late 1980s. In effect, with the banning of the United Democratic Front (UDF)⁵ in 1987, the labour movement took on the leadership role of the internal resistance movement (Naidoo, 2010). As long as this continued, the possibility of working class leadership of the anti-apartheid struggle was kept alive.

COSATU, in its meetings with the ANC, SACP and SACTU⁶ in exile, stressed that it was an independent formation and not a transmission belt for the ANC or SACP. Along with the UDF, it had some influence on the relatively hierarchical ANC and SACP, helping to deepen the lessons learnt about the failures of one-party state "socialism", and a greater appreciation of the values of mass participatory democracy (Callinicos, 2004; Butler, 2007; Naidoo, 2010). As unionists and independent socialists joined the SACP in large numbers after 1990, the party showed some signs that it was shedding its adherence to a narrow Soviet-style Marxism-Leninism. The hope was raised that it could become the non-dogmatic, independent, and counter-hegemonic mass workers' party many in COSATU sought. This promise, however, was largely unfulfilled, although the SACP did adopt a programme of democratic socialism (Williams, 2008).

Once the ANC and SACP were unbanned in 1990, the worst fears of independent socialists seemed realized, as the ANC took over the leadership of the internal movement, closing down the UDF and gradually reducing COSATU to the role of one interest group among many. Ironically, many prominent "workerists" went on to join the ANC in government and parliament. Some went further to become wealthy businessmen. However, a few remained in the

union movement to build on COSATU's heritage of social movement unionism (see Marais, 2011).

Since 1990, when the ANC and SACP dissolved SACTU and formally drew COSATU into a triple alliance in pursuit of their "national democratic revolution", COSATU drifted towards a narrower form of political unionism. While retaining its independence and its commitment to mass action where necessary, and continuing to engage in wide-ranging policy contestation inside and outside multi-party corporatist forums such as the NEDLAC and COSATU dared not push too far and forge links with movements critical of the Tripartite Alliance. This was despite severe misgivings about the government's adoption of the market-friendly, economically orthodox Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy in 1996, particularly without first consulting the larger ANC or any of its Alliance partners (Marais, 2011).

Perhaps, the popularity of the ANC was by that stage too great for an alternative path to be feasible for COSATU – and besides the political consciousness of union members, which showed firm support for the ANC-alliance, there were also symbiotic relations of patronage that came with being in the Tripartite Alliance. (This, however, is a matter of debate: some critics believe that had COSATU asserted its independence, and led a counter-hegemonic movement outside the Alliance, it could have changed the political consciousness of its members).

As relations with the ANC deteriorated under Mbeki, who replaced Nelson Mandela as President, COSATU and the SACP became part of a massive tidal wave in favour of Zuma, who was removed from the deputy presidency and implicated in corruption charges in 2003. Instead of reviving full-scale social movement unionism, and/or forging a Left alternative outside the Alliance, as independent socialists within COSATU and the SACP argued, COSATU vigorously put its faith in Zuma, as a sort of workers' candidate against Mbeki. Zuma ousted Mbeki and became ANC president in 2007, and then the country's President in 2009.

It was previously argued (Pillay, 2008) that the line-up of contradictory class forces supporting Zuma could not be sustained, and that as inequality, unemployment and poverty persisted, ominous authoritarian tendencies would gather force under a Zuma regime. COSATU would over time become disenchanted with the Zuma project, and as tensions mounted between the democratic Left and

the Zuma regime, conditions would emerge for a genuine counter-hegemonic project to emerge.

However, what was not foreseen was how *soon* the Zuma coalition would start to unravel. Shortly after the April 2009 national elections, and the appointment of SACP General Secretary Blade Nzimande as Higher Education Minister and SACP Deputy General Secretary Jeremy Cronin as Deputy Minister of Transport, turbulence within the Alliance increased significantly. While the government dared not talk openly about labour market flexibility, it became clear that the country's liberal economic policy was not going to change because the ANC was too beholden to the minerals-energy-financial complex revolving around the convergent interests of state managers and private corporations, and the perceived need to attract foreign investment, as opposed to mobilizing domestic capital for productive investment (Mohamed, 2010).

COSATU soon realized that there was more continuity with the past than change, and by the end of 2011 its General Secretary Zwelinizma Vavi was still lamenting the fact that “millions of South Africans in economic terms are no better off, or even worse off, than before 1994” (Vavi, 2012:14). Corruption has become widespread (COSATU, 2012), and there are ominous signs of creeping social conservatism under Zuma (Butler, 2010), as well as threats to the liberal constitutional order (see later).

COSATU, in its analysis of the post-Polokwane era, identifies three phases of its relationship with the ruling party. Firstly, there was the “honeymoon” phase from December 2007 to mid-2009. During this period two supposedly “successful” Alliance summits were held, and the Alliance produced a “progressive” election manifesto. COSATU and the SACP were “consulted” on the appointment of the new Cabinet and won the new post of Economic Development, to “coordinate economic policy”. However, there were nevertheless “clear signs that the old bureaucracy and leaders of the 96-class project” (i.e. the neo-liberal approach of the ANC, which COSATU dates to 1996) continued to hold sway in both the ANC and government (COSATU, 2010a: 20).

Secondly, there was the “fight back and contestation” phase from mid-2009 to 2010, when soon after the national elections which brought Zuma to power, it became clear that conservative class forces were still ascendant in the ANC, particularly around macro-economic policy, and the ANC rejected calls for the Alliance

to be the political centre. Thirdly, COSATU identified the current “political paralysis” phase, where the ANC has allegedly refused to honour all the policy commitments made at Polokwane. These supposedly include a move away from a conservative macro-economic policy, making the Alliance (not the ANC) the “political centre” of the movement for “national democratic revolution”, and banning labour brokers⁷.

The more things change . . .

As argued above, social movement unionism is about going beyond the workplace and addressing issues of concern to the working class in the broader community, as well as forging alliances with like-minded organizations in pursuit of broader participatory-democratic transformation, and being independent and accountable, in the first instance, to an empowered and democratically organized membership. Unlike political unionism, social movement unions are not subordinate to political parties.

While in *form* COSATU maintained much of this profile since the 1990s, in *substance* its social movement union character became substantially thinner. Its alliance with the ANC and SACP significantly compromised its independence and notably it dared not forge alliances with organizations critical of the Alliance. It hardly had a presence in community struggles fighting water and electricity privatization and cost recovery practices, or with evictions and other working class struggles that inevitably involved clashes with ANC town councillors.⁸ It also did not reach out to communities to support workplace struggles, through union-community campaigns, as it did in the 1980s.

In addition, its internal democratic practices were slowly giving way to oligarchy, as the gap between leaders and members widened (see Buhlungu, 2010). This was in large part due to affiliates becoming larger and more professionalized, and union leaders becoming more “middle class”, with substantially increased salary packages and greater prospects of upward mobility into government and business. For example, COSATU general secretary reported earns R550,000 per annum (a university professor’s salary), while the NUM general secretary earns around R1,2m per annum (*Sunday Independent* 3/9/12). Unions have also increasingly used legal and institutional channels to resolve disputes, and participated in a range of corporatist forums, not least NEDLAC, to negotiate policy with

government and business. As COSATU surveys indicate, members are largely unaware of what happens in these forums (see Buhlungu, 2006 and footnote 15).

Nevertheless, the drift towards political unionism (including corporatism)⁹, and to an extent business unionism, was never complete. COSATU continued to flex its muscles in mass action, engage in a wide range of issues (both workplace and non-workplace), and to criticize the policies of the ANC government. This intensified, ironically, after the rise to power of Zuma in 2009. The massive August-September 2010 public sector strike; the highly successful March 2012 one-day nation-wide stayaway in protest against labour broking and the tolling of highways in Gauteng province; robust opposition to the government's draconian Protection of Information Bill; along with the federation's flirtation with civil society actors critical of the Alliance, amongst other things; seemed to herald a return to a more robust form of social movement unionism.

In the 2010 public sector strike COSATU embarked on an extended nation-wide strike that saw union members hurling insults at the President, questioning his sexual morality (the polygamous Zuma had previously faced rape charges and while acquitted, admitted to having sex with his late friend's HIV positive daughter, and having other affairs out of wedlock) and his government's perceived imperviousness to the pain of public sector workers. The strike followed the equally massive 2007 public sector strike, when Mbeki was still at the helm. The Zuma-led ANC promised, in its 2009 election manifesto, an expanded public sector, "improvements in working conditions and the provision of decent wages for workers" (Hassen, 2010: 4). Instead, workers saw high pay increases and excess amongst the elite. Rising inequality and the conspicuous consumption of the old and new elite fuelled workers' resolve to demand more out of a government that promised much, but only delivered eroding real wages and high unemployment. Employed workers (particular black workers) have to clothe and feed an extended family – which usually includes unemployed and under-employed workers. Eventually, after three weeks of bitter industrial action, a settlement was reached, but not all workers were satisfied, with further disputes pencilled in for the future (Bekker and Van der Walt, 2010; Hassen, 2010 & 2011a; Ceruti, 2011).

In September 2010, COSATU published its own redistributive economic policy proposals, which urged greater state intervention in

the economy to transform its industrial structure within the context of “sustainable development” and regional integration (COSATU, 2010b). These proposals were meant to influence the final New Growth Path (NGP) eagerly awaited from the new COSATU-initiated ministry of Economic Development, amidst fears that this department was being sidelined in government, in preference to the more conservative Treasury.

When the NGP was finally released in November 2010, calling amongst other things for an incomes pact between business and labour, and greater attention to growing green jobs, it was received with a lukewarm response from COSATU. By contrast the SACP, which supports Zuma almost uncritically, endorsed the NGP as a good starting point, as it generated massive job creation and a greater seriousness about implementing an aggressive industrial policy – and was therefore supposedly a real break with GEAR (e.g. Cronin, 2011a).

COSATU also won broader public support for its principled stance against corruption¹⁰ and the rise of a “predatory elite” in the ANC (and ANCYL), as well as threats to civil liberties protected under the Constitution. Unlike the SACP, COSATU added its voice to that of the media and groups like the Freedom of Expression Institute, the Right to Know (R2K) campaign and SOS: Support Public Broadcasting, when the ANC proposed a Media Appeals Tribunal (MAT) and government was seen to meddle in the affairs of the SABC, and, most worryingly, to push through a Protection of Information Bill that threatened to restrict access to information deemed critical to the public interest. Ominous voices within the ANC, SACP and ANCYL seemed bent on muzzling the media specifically to prevent ANC politicians from being publicly scrutinized.

COSATU’s voice in all of this served to deflect slurs that only the white middle class was opposed to the ANC’s proposals. COSATU re-affirmed its reputation as a defender of human rights and democratic freedoms. By contrast, the SACP’s Nzimande spoke of the private media as the “greatest threat to democracy” (Grootes, 2010). Before parliamentary hearings on the Protection of Information Bill in March 2012, the SACP’s Cape Town region, in conjunction with the ANC and the almost moribund South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO), embarked on a poorly attended “public protest” action *against* the R2K campaign, accusing it of being agents of “foreign interests” opposed to “national democratic”

transformation (SACP-ANC-SANCO Cape Metro Media Release, 29 March 2012).

This spectacle was preceded by virulent attacks on independent Left critics by SACP leaders Nzimande and Cronin, who accused them of being part of an “anti-majoritarian liberal agenda” (Cronin, 2012; Nzimande, 2012). Even though COSATU was not directly mentioned in these attacks, it was clear that the party was warning its ally not to become derailed from the “national democratic revolution” by flirting with “liberals” in opposition to government (see later).

Since 2010, COSATU has also increasingly raised the question of Nzimande being in government (as Minister of Higher Education) and consequently neglecting his SACP duties. In terms of SACP rule, Nzimande could not serve as both party General-Secretary and a full-time minister. According to Vavi, COSATU was unhappy about the SACP specially changing its constitution in 2009 to allow Nzimande to go into government while retaining his position as General Secretary of the party (*SABC News online*, 1/5/11). At the Wits University Ruth First Memorial Lecture on 17 August 2010, Vavi, reflecting on the social crisis facing the country, declared that SACP martyr First would ask “where her South African Communist Party is, and why it has not led a united working class in a struggle to change the direction we seem to be taking” (Vavi, 2010).

Later, COSATU would specifically call on Nzimande to leave the government and focus on his SACP duties, even offering to pay him a minister’s salary. This gesture angered the party hierarchy, which felt it was an insult to suggest that Nzimande was in government for the money as opposed to for the working class. It was a sensitive point, given an outcry in 2009 when Nzimande was identified as one of several Zuma ministers who had spent millions on top-of-the-line German cars.

COSATU’s criticisms of the ANC and the SACP, alongside its explicit flirtation with organizations of civil society to the left of the ANC, provoked an unprecedented backlash from its alliance partners, with the SACP for the first time openly criticizing COSATU.

COSATU, in conjunction with the TAC and its civil rights ally Section 27, organized a “civil society conference” and did not invite its allies (except SANCO) on the grounds that political parties were not part of “civil society”. The ANC and SACP were furious.

Gwede Mantashe warned COSATU against working towards “regime change”, and the ANC’s National Working Committee accused the gathering of attempting “to put a wedge between civil society formations, some unions, the ANC and its government” (COSATU, 2010c). The SACP’s Cronin (2010) suggested that COSATU was falling into a “liberal” trap to upset the “national democratic revolution”.

Contrary to popular convention, Cronin defined “civil society” as including the corporate sector, which enabled him to argue that civil society was a suspect terrain of pro-market “liberalism” opposed to the radical people’s will embodied in the state. Because the conference made no reference to the “national democratic revolution”, he proceeded to portray it as “anti-transformation”. While acknowledging that it would be “crass” to suggest that those formations present at the conference were “simply imperialist agents” or part of some “major conspiracy”, he warned COSATU that “we need to be very careful that we are not manipulated into someone else’s strategic agenda, particularly when that agenda is itself increasingly hegemonised by a much more right-wing, anti-majoritarian liberalism” (Cronin, 2010:3). (Ironically, many of COSATU’s criticisms of the ANC centre on that party’s embrace of neo-liberalism, a far cry from the ANC-as-radical-regime-under-capitalist-threat portrayed by Cronin).

These harsh criticisms were followed in January with a cutting attack on COSATU’s criticism of government’s New Growth Path economic policy (NGP). Cronin accused COSATU of “entirely missing the bigger picture”, and having a “redistributionist approach to transformation” which, he implied, did not ask “what is right and wrong about our productive economy”. There was a “paradigm shift” from GEAR, Cronin asserted, implicit in the NGP’s emphasis on massive job creation (2011a:2).

Cronin seemed to ignore COSATU’s substantial policy proposals for a pro-working class growth path, issued in September 2010. Far from being narrowly “redistributionist”, these proposals were a restatement of COSATU’s long-held and far-reaching call for decisive state intervention in the economy to steer it away from the minerals-energy-financial complex and in favour of the working class. These proposals were fully endorsed by the civil society conference, underlining its deeply transformative, progressive agenda (TAC and Section 27, 2010; COSATU, 2011).

Vavi, in an address to Barometer SA in March 2011, clearly argued for a “radically different macroeconomic strategy, based, among others, on lower interest rates, a weaker rand, and more tariff protection for vulnerable industries identified by IPAP2¹¹ and NGP as potential job drivers”. He also underlined the need for a “much bigger role for the state in directing investment into the sectors where jobs can be created”, including using state-owned enterprises to create jobs (Vavi, 2011). COSATU was clearly of the view that the NGP had not shifted government away from an essentially neo-liberal paradigm that contradicted the developmental goals set out in the NGP – not least of which was massive job creation stressed by Cronin.

COSATU did not openly criticize Economic Development Minister (and former trade unionist) Ebrahim Patel directly, nor his ally, the SACP’s Rob Davies, Minister of Trade and Industry and so, responsible for industrial policy. These two departments are clearly at odds with more conservative bureaucrats in Treasury, which has constrained their more heterodox economic perspectives within a macro-economic “straight-jacket”. COSATU was appreciative of the fact that the NGP did contain progressive proposals around job creation, and that Patel’s department seemed to have won the battle to become the lead department in economic policy development.

However, COSATU remains concerned about government’s inability to produce “an overarching development plan capable of fundamentally confronting the triple challenges” of unemployment, poverty and inequality “and the legacy of apartheid and colonialism. There is inconsistency in aggressively taking forward the five job drivers of the government New Growth Path – infrastructure, manufacturing, green jobs, mining and agriculture” (2012: 2).

The Federation has also joined environmental groups in becoming increasingly sceptical about government’s subordination of “green economy” issues to market imperatives, and its inability to recognize that climate change and environmental degradation are directly linked to the treadmill of capitalist growth and consumption (Cock, 2012).

In March 2012 COSATU embarked on a massive one-day stayaway in protest against government’s reluctance to address the problem of increasing labour informalization, by banning labour brokers – a measure that the ANC had promised to consider after Polokwane. COSATU tied this protest to opposition to the

introduction of tolling on highways in Gauteng province, which it argued represented another form of commodification of public goods, which further entrenched “economic apartheid” in the context of poor and limited public transport. Although the SACP (unenthusiastically and eventually) came out in support of the stayaway, it clearly differed with COSATU’s assessment, sparking an acrimonious debate between the SACP’s Cronin and Irvin Jim, General Secretary of one of COSATU’s largest and most leftwing affiliates, the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA)¹².

... The more they remain the same

Yet if COSATU is showing signs of reviving its more robust social movement character, it has not quite gone far enough to be regarded as once again a fully-fledged social movement union federation. COSATU remains basically located amongst relatively privileged formal workers, has made few inroads into the ranks of the informalized and unemployed working class, and has very thin links indeed to working class community struggles. This, as well as the benefits that accrue to some leaders from patronage wielded by the ANC government¹³ has, arguably, obliged COSATU to continue to seek transformation from within the suffocating embrace of the ANC-Alliance.

For example, although the public potentially had much sympathy for the low pay of public sector workers during their 2010 strike – particularly health professionals and teachers – there was no attempt to build alliances between striking workers and poor communities. Instead, poor communities bore the brunt of the strike action through neglected essential services in hospitals and schools (particularly in townships). Public sector workers tended to give the impression that they were only interested in their own narrow wage and working conditions, and cared little about building a broader working class unity: it did not use the strike to raise larger questions about ANC policy, but kept the strike narrowly economic (see Bekker and van der Walt, 2010). This was an opportunity lost for COSATU to re-ignite its social movement unionism, and to build broader solidarity.

Moreover, the COSATU leadership seemed as eager as the ANC to calm things down before the crucial National General Council (NGC) of the ANC in September 2010. The strike ended without many issues resolved and without a clear mandate from

strikers. By all accounts the NGC allowed diverse views to be aired, and the ANC came out of it relatively calm and focused (Turok, 2010). The ANC once again showed its skill at orchestrating a wide range of discordant voices into one palatable tune, only for the fragile unity to unravel again soon afterwards –and while discordant voices were heard, COSATU’s proposals did not make a real impact on ANC policy.

The matter of most concern to the ANC leadership is the issue of nationalization, supported for different reasons and in different ways by both COSATU and the ANCYL. Nationalization was not adopted, and the ANCYL was notably irked by the manner in which the issue was deflected into a two-year research investigation. The ANCYL has since ensured that the issue remains on the public agenda, as part of its “economic freedom in our lifetime”, but the ANCYL is itself under pressure from the mother body, with Malema (at the time of writing) set to be expelled. NUMSA, in particular, has supported some nationalization but avoided supporting the ANCYL, given the controversy surrounding Malema, who along with other League leaders has been sharply disciplined for criticizing the ANC leadership, in particular Zuma¹⁴. As noted below, COSATU leaders tend to consider the Malema ANCYL leadership as exemplifying the “predatory” “lumpen bourgeoisie” that has arisen in the ANC.

COSATU’s support for the ANC during the 2011 municipal elections, even while it continued to criticize government policy, underlined its commitment to building the ANC-led Alliance and to working from within that Alliance. It continues to believe in the strategy of “swelling the ranks” of the ANC to ensure that in future it elects leaders who truly have the interests of the working class at heart. This is understandable as a survey¹⁵ of COSATU members’ political attitudes confirmed the continued, if gradually declining, popularity of the ANC and the Alliance amongst workers. Support still remains at 60 per cent (down from 82 per cent in 1994, 70 per cent in 1998 and 66 per cent in 2004). However, those who are now unhappy about the Alliance are more interested in COSATU being non-aligned (21 per cent), than being involved with a new workers party (19 per cent).

Interestingly, despite COSATU’s denunciation of the neo-liberal GEAR, most workers (75 per cent) had never heard of it. Of those that did, 40 per cent believed it was achieving its goals of growth, employment and redistribution, yet only 45 per cent

believed that it was not. Tellingly, 62 per cent of the workers vote for the ANC because of its policies or past performance (although many are quite vague on core ANC policies); only 21 per cent vote out of loyalty or because of union instructions (2 per cent). Clearly, despite anger at government for not meeting many working class aspirations, for most workers this does not yet mean abandoning the ANC or the Alliance. If the ANC does not satisfy workers in future, only 6 per cent are today interested in forming an alternative workers' party (compared to 38 per cent in 2004, and 33 per cent in 1998). Workers prefer ongoing mass action or pressurising unionists in parliament (62 per cent).

In other words, ordinary worker sentiments are not out of line with those of the union leadership. Working class aspirations, for most COSATU members, must be fought for within the ANC and the Alliance, rather than outside it – and the somewhat misleading appearance of the post-Polokwane ANC to be more attentive to the working class and the SACP (whose central committee has been largely incorporated into the ANC as senior officials under Zuma) reinforces this approach. Nevertheless, while worker support for the ANC during the May 2011 municipal elections was largely uncontested outside the Western Cape, COSATU's Vavi revealed that he had to campaign vigorously in Port Elizabeth to ensure that disillusioned workers came out to vote ANC (Kgosana, 2011).

Nevertheless, the ANC vote in 2009 increased from 10.9 million in 2004 to 11.7million in 2009 (less than the 12.2m cast in 1994, but significant nonetheless) (Southall and Daniel, 2009). Is this the case of relative “insiders” (organized workers) being comfortable with a liberation movement that has, according to the SWOP survey, brought them some benefits? These include better housing (56 per cent), access to clean water (81 per cent), electricity (79 per cent), a telephone (65 per cent), better public transport (55 per cent), better health care (53 per cent), HIV-AIDS treatment (62 per cent), education and training (62 per cent) and a clean and healthy working and living environment (61 per cent). The matter is more complicated: while much of the ANC vote came from organized workers, it is safe to assume that the 11.7 million also included a large number of unorganized workers and the unemployed in urban and rural areas.

While these figures indicate that the majority seem relatively satisfied, a sizeable minority clearly are not, particularly

with regard to housing, transport and health care. Most COSATU members are unhappy about their access to nutritional food (55 per cent), wages (72 per cent), land (59 per cent), and jobs (72 per cent). The unemployed and under-employed majority of the working class (which fall outside of today's COSATU structures and campaigns) are even less likely to be satisfied, as ongoing "service delivery" protests indicate.

Moreover, while ANC results at elections remain strong, there is significant alienation from the political process itself by a large section of the population, which sees little return from voting, particularly within the context of ongoing "service delivery" protests. Thus, 6.8 million of the 30 million entitled to vote in 2009 did not register, while a further 5.3 million who did register did not actually vote, making a grand total 12.1m voters (or 40.3 per cent of eligible voters) who did not vote at all. The percentage of "valid votes" (actual votes counted compared to voter turnout) for the ANC has remained stable at 66 per cent. However, the percentage of "eligible voters" (i.e. all those who qualified to vote) voting for the ANC declined notably, from 53.8 per cent in 1994 to 38.8 per cent in 2009 (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2009).

While the ANC received 62 per cent of all votes cast in the 2011 municipal elections, according to Hassen (2011b), using Statistics South Africa's 2010 Mid-Year Population Estimates, 15.6 million eligible voters over 20 years of age did not vote at all, compared to the 13.7 million voters that did, i.e. a slight majority stayed away from the elections. If 18-20 year olds are counted in, the "silent majority" increases even more, indicating a significant and potentially increasing degree of voter alienation, even after taking into account that municipal elections normally attract lower voter turnouts.

This mixed picture of declining, but persistent, support for the ANC amongst the working class may explain why COSATU dare not pursue politics outside the Alliance. The ANC maintains a mystical status as the key movement of national liberation amongst the majority of South Africans, even as it continues to disappoint. Leaders, it seems, may be criticized, at times severely – but the movement, like a religious authority, may not be questioned, at least for the immediate future.

As long as this persists, COSATU will remain caught between a robust social movement unionism, and a tamer political unionism.

This union schizophrenia is exacerbated by the unprecedented spats between COSATU and the SACP, which threatens to divide the federation. The SACP has fought for continued COSATU support for the Zuma leadership—particularly through the federation’s president, S’dumo Dlamini, who is an SACP central committee member. In April 2012 Dlamini insisted that being an ANC and SACP member did not compromise his politics, but was in the federation’s best interests:

...I know that there will be those who say because the comrade.... is not seen to be punching holes in the ANC, then...he is too close to the ANC. It’s pure political bankruptcy.... you run the risk of taking COSATU far away from the ANC. That’s dangerous.

(Business Day, 2/4/2012).

By contrast, Vavi refused to become part of the ANC’s national executive committee, on the grounds that it would compromise COSATU’s independence.

Despite reports of “robust engagement” between COSATU and the SACP at their 2 April 2012 bilateral meeting, the joint statement issued afterwards smoothed over the issues, re-affirmed “the commitment of both organisations to support.... the [ANC’s] leadership collective elected at Polokwane” and to “stand shoulder to shoulder, together with the ANC, in the struggle to deepen our national democratic revolution” (COSATU and SACP Media Release, 3 April 2012).

Conclusion

While there is nothing new in the tensions between COSATU and the ANC (this has persisted since 1996), what is new is the schism between the union federation and its working class ally, the SACP, which is now enmeshed in government to an unprecedented degree. Meanwhile, the Zuma regime’s apparent drift towards a “democratic developmental state” co-exists with and is severely undermined by its adherence to a conservative macro-economic framework, increasing corruption and state dysfunction, creeping social conservatism and the rise of an ominous securocrat agenda that threatens civil liberties. The Left in the Alliance is thus divided between those who want to deepen whatever progressive impulses are detectable within Zuma’s ANC and government, while a growing voice within COSATU is

looking towards leadership change in the ANC. However, none are seriously contemplating building a counter-hegemonic movement outside the Alliance.

In the run-up to the December 2012 ANC leadership contest, tensions have crystallized around the issue of support for the Zuma leadership and candidacy, which the SACP wants maintained, while those against Zuma are led by an increasingly marginalized ANCYL. Within COSATU, there is also a split on the Zuma issues. COSATU's affiliates, many led by SACP leaders, are split between those following the SACP's lead, embodied by Dlamini, and those who follow the lead of Vavi, who has taken a more independent position. Neither faction is enamoured with the ANCYL, even though COSATU itself has a policy supporting nationalization. They are largely united in their belief that the ANCYL's calls for nationalization are populist slogans designed to strengthen the hand of the "lumpen bourgeoisie".

For the foreseeable future, this is the political terrain upon which COSATU will engage as its primary site of struggle. The ANC-government's recent hints about building a more interventionist developmental state, perhaps in the vein of Chinese capitalism (*Mail and Guardian*, 3/2/12) – even as it remains tied to the minerals-energy-financial complex that was the hallmark of apartheid-capitalism – coupled with continued welfare provisions in the form of meagre social grants and relatively protective labour legislation, will buy it more time with the working class in COSATU.

As a result, COSATU will for a while yet keep oscillating between social movement unionism, and political unionism. While it may continue to flirt with civil society groups that do not directly challenge the ANC, such as the TAC and Section 27, it will be a long time before it would even blink at more critical suitors, such as the newly formed Democratic Left Front (DLF). The DLF was formed in January 2011 as a loose coalition of Left, community and small union groups, in pursuit of a participatory-democratic, feminist eco-socialism (DLF, 2011). However, without organized labour it remains a marginal voice on the political landscape. Indeed, it seems clear that a new counter-hegemonic project will have to first emerge from within the labour movement, for it to have any credibility.

If the ANC continues on a development path that does not tackle the roots of poverty, inequality and corruption, but instead erodes the civil liberties embedded in the South African Constitution,

it is likely that organized labour will make that decisive break, and build a Left pole of attraction. In doing so it will draw on the lessons of its own history of vibrant social movement unionism.

Endnotes

1. Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. E-mail: devan.pillay@wits.ac.za.
2. Discussion with Oupa Bodibe, then COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi's personal assistant and adviser, September 2004.
3. Mbeki did almost nothing to prevent Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's repression of opposition, particularly the trade union-aligned Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), and election rigging.
4. According to the National Planning Commission (2011) poverty measured at less than \$2 per day (or R524 per month) rose from 53 per cent in 1995 to 58 per cent in 2001, and then fell to 48 per cent in 2008 - largely as a result of increasing (although very modest) grant income (for child care, pension and disability), while wage income has declined (unemployment was officially at 23.9 per cent in 2011, but unofficially closer to 36 per cent). The poorest 20 per cent earns 2.2 per cent of total income, while the richest 20 per cent earns 70 per cent - very much the same picture as in 1995, the only difference being the rising black middle class - where Africans in the top 20 per cent increased from 39 per cent to 48 per cent during this period.
5. Formed in 1983 as an umbrella body for a wide range of community and political organisations throughout the country - viewed by some as in many ways the legal expression of the ANC inside the country (Seekings, 2000).
6. The SA Congress of Trade Unions was formed in 1955, and formed part of the Congress Alliance led by the ANC. It exemplified "political unionism" in that it was subordinated to the ANC, and effectively dissolved inside the country when the ANC was banned in 1960. It thereafter operated in exile as the labour arm of the ANC and SACP.
7. While there may have been expectations in this regard, resulting from promises made in private, the ANC tradition is to couch potentially controversial resolutions in ambiguous terms, and these are no exception (see Zikalala, 2010). This has allowed the ANC more freedom to manoeuvre - and to break the spirit of agreements reached, but not the letter.
8. The only exception was the SA Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU).
9. Cosatu's participation in corporatist state-business-labour forums,

such as NEDLAC, can be regarded as a form of political unionism, in that they become enmeshed with the state, while being closely allied to the ruling party. However, where such unions are substantially independent, and not fully subordinate to political parties (a characteristic of political unionism) even though they may provide funding for political parties, they have also been labelled “social democratic unionism” (Fairbrother and Webster, 2008) or “strategic unionism” (Von Holdt, 2002).

10. In 2012 it formed Corruption Watch headed by former unionist and head of the Competitions Tribunal, David Lewis, to investigate and expose corruption in society.
11. This refers to the second Industrial Policy Action Plan of the DTI.
12. See *Umsebenzi* Vol 11(11) 29 March 2012, for both sides of this debate. The SACP’s support for this stayaway, one of the largest in recent history, seemed forced and qualified, as the Cronin response indicates.
13. A prominent NUMSA unionist lamented to the author (January 2012) that even as COSATU ratchets up its criticism of government, key leaders of affiliates have their eye on government tenders, and future employment in the civil service, or as appointees to high office at local, provincial and national levels (see also Buhlungu, 2010).
14. Malema is also being investigated for corruption due to his close relationship with the ANC government in Limpopo province. However, it is his criticism of Zuma’s leadership, in particular, for not fully supporting his brash style of politics, and not his corruption, that got him into trouble. Malema was finally expelled by the ANC in April 2012, after a lengthy disciplinary process (which also saw key lieutenants suspended). These decisions, however, are subject to appeal to the ANC’s NEC and December 2012 national conference
15. This survey was conducted by the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) in 2008-2009, as part of a series of surveys conducted amongst COSATU members before each national election since 1994 (see Pillay, 2006). All figures quoted are from the data set summary provided by SWOP.

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