

Contrôle ouvrier, marxisme-léninisme et revitalisation des politiques de classe ouvrière en Afrique du Sud

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Résumé

La décision cruciale prise par la National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) de quitter l'alliance tripartite avec le parti au pouvoir, le Congrès national africain (ANC) et avec le Parti communiste sud-africain (SACP), pourrait bien changer la donne. Cette décision survient à la suite du massacre des mineurs à Marikana en août 2012, ainsi que du clivage des syndicats, de l'émergence de partis alternatifs « de gauche » et de la suspension du secrétaire général de la Confédération des syndicats sud-africains (COSATU), Zwelinzima Vavi. La question du contrôle ouvrier revient à l'avant-plan, tant au niveau de la démocratie syndicale qu'au niveau sociétal plus large. La NUMSA et ses détracteurs du SACP se réclament tous deux de l'héritage marxiste-léniniste pour justifier leurs positions, ainsi que le font les nouveaux partis Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) et Workers and Socialist Party (WASP). Le principe initial de contrôle ouvrier avancé par la COSATU rejetait pourtant explicitement la notion léniniste avant-gardiste de « centralisme démocratique » et jetait les bases du syndicalisme de mouvement social transformateur qui caractérisait la COSATU des premières années. La confédération se trouve maintenant à la croisée des chemins : d'un côté, un syndicalisme politique étroit, subordonné à l'alliance SACP/ANC; de l'autre, un syndicalisme de mouvement social indépendant et revitalisé – amorcé par la NUMSA – qui se préoccupe des crises sociale et écologique, et échange avec d'autres formations au sein de la société, dans sa poursuite d'une nouvelle impulsion « socialiste ».

Workers' Control, Marxist-Leninism and the Revitalisation of Working Class Politics in South Africa

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Abstract

The momentous decision by the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) to move out of the alliance with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP) is a potential game-changer. It follows the Marikana massacre of mineworkers in August 2012, union splits, the emergence of alternative 'left' parties and the suspension of COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi. It brings to the fore once again the issue of 'workers control', both at the level of internal union democracy and at the broader societal level. Both NUMSA and its SACP detractors use the Marxist-Leninist heritage to justify their positions, as do the newly formed Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party and the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP). The original idea of workers' control in COSATU, however, was an explicit rejection of the vanguardist interpretation of Leninist 'democratic centralism', and laid the basis for a transformative social movement unionism that characterised COSATU during its early years. It now stands at the crossroads of, on the one hand, a narrow political unionism, subordinated to the SACP/ANC, and on the other a revitalised, independent social movement unionism - initiated by NUMSA - that engages with both the social and ecological crisis, as well as with other formations within society, in pursuit of a new movement for 'socialism'.

Introduction

The December 2013 resolution of the National Union of Metalworker (NUMSA), the largest affiliate of the SA Congress of Trade Union (COSATU), to leave the tripartite alliance between the federation and the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP), has opened a new chapter in the history of working class politics in South Africa. While NUMSA did not resolve to disaffiliate from COSATU (which once

again gave its unconditional support to the ANC during the 2014 elections campaign) it withdrew from the election campaign, and undertook to work towards the building of a broad united front of organizations and groups ‘against neo-liberal policies’, and alongside that to explore the establishment of a ‘movement for socialism’ that could eventually become a political organization (NUMSA, 2013c).

This decision follows the Marikana massacre of mineworkers in August 2012, the ANC government’s adoption of the essentially neoliberal National Development Plan (NDP) and the suspension of COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, a firm NUMSA ally. It is likely to deepen even further the fractures within COSATU and the tripartite alliance. It also brings to the fore once again the notion of workers’ control in the unions, and in broader society, as NUMSA and new left forces (such as the EFF, WASP and the Democratic Left Front (DLF)) contest the SACP’s claim that it is *the* ‘Marxist-Leninist’ vanguard of the working class. These issues crystallize around the increased social distance of union leaders from members, and the debate on the ‘nationalization’ of the commanding heights of the economy, including NUMSA’s proposals around a ‘socially owned’ renewable energy sector that challenges the hold of the minerals-energy-financial complex over economic policy.

This article explores the intellectual roots of the notion of workers’ control within the ‘shopfloor’ union tradition that became part of COSATU in 1985. It contrasts the early understanding with the current debate, and the manner in which various ideological discourses are being used to justify or oppose the federation’s continued support for the Zuma-led ANC and its ‘green’ neoliberal development path. It also briefly looks at alternatives outside the tripartite alliance, as the country gears itself towards national elections in 2014. This, out of necessity, is an early analysis of a highly fluid situation, both within the union movement, the broad Left and national politics.

The workers’ control tradition within Cosatu

Workers’ control is not only a means whereby I can control a specific area of my life. It is an educational process in which I can learn better to control all areas of my life and can develop both psychological and interpersonal skills in a situation of co-operation with my fellows in a common task.....participation in decision-

making, whether in family, in the school, in voluntary organisations, or at work, increases the ability to participate and increases the competence on the part of the individual that is vital for balanced and autonomous development. Participation through workers' control lays the basis for love as a constant rather than as a fleeting relationship between people. (Turner, 1972/1980: 39)

These sentiments by radical academic Richard Turner, who was assassinated in 1978 by the apartheid regime, inspired a new generation of union activists in the 1970s, who laid the foundation of the newly emerging labour movement that helped re-shape South Africa. Since the momentous 1973 Durban strikes, the ANC and SACP (and their trade union arm SACTU) had to compete vigorously with an alternative brand of working class politics, one that did not readily subscribe to the vanguardist² interpretation of 'Marxist-Leninism' promoted by the SACP. Instead, a participatory-democratic vision of politics was embedded in the ethos of those unions labelled 'workerist', and which formed the core of what today is the Congress of SA Trade Unions (COSATU). These included the unions in the Federation of SA Trade Unions (FOSATU), based mainly in Natal and Transvaal, and the Cape-based Western Province General Workers' Union (WPGWU) and the Food and Canning Workers' Union (FCWU)³.

The ANC and SACP leaned towards a vanguardist/oligarchic mode of struggle, which placed power within the hands of the leadership, and followers followed. This style combined traditional patriarchal-authoritarian modes of leadership generally favoured by nationalist politicians, with the Marxist-Leninist mode of 'democratic centralism' favoured by communist parties. Although during the 1950s the ANC experimented with different forms of democracy⁴, wide gaps between the education and expertise of the leadership and that of followers tended to entrench oligarchy, as did the conditions of exile and illegality after 1960, which gave such top-down forms of organization a degree of legitimacy.

The shopfloor unions and to some extent the UDF, on the other hand, promoted a participatory-democratic mode of struggle, where decisions were made collectively (particularly within small organizations such as women's groups, environmental groups or sub-structures of the UDF in some regions more than others) or

where transparency and regular report-backs were embedded in the structure of the organization (such as the larger shopfloor trade unions). In many of the shopfloor unions, officials were not allowed to vote, giving formal power to elected worker leaders as a way of ensuring accountability (Friedman, 2007).

The goals of all organizations within the liberation movement were ostensibly 'socialist'. However, the exiled movements⁵ favoured a *statist* (Soviet, Maoist or Social Democratic) understanding of 'socialism', whilst the internal movements were in varying degrees influenced by participatory (or *society*-centric) conceptions of socialism that were implicitly or explicitly critical of the statist models⁶. These two modes of organization were combined in the UDF nationally, and expressed itself in different ways in different parts of the country. The movement in exile looked to the mass struggles inside the country for inspiration, whilst key leaders of the movements within the country looked externally for guidance, or 'the line'. As the latter grew more confident and assured of their own power and abilities, they began to assert greater independence of thinking during the late 1980s.

The tension between these two modes of struggle can be crystallized in the debate on what is 'working class leadership'. The one view expressed in the UDF⁷ (which resonated with the unions), was that it meant working class people (broadly defined⁸) rising to the fore in leadership, as well as the working class membership having a substantial say in the running of their organizations. Combined with socialist intellectuals from the middle class, this would ensure a socialist orientation of the movement. The counter view was that 'working class leadership' resided with the SACP in exile and in revolutionary cells operating underground within the country – in keeping with a particular 'Marxist-Leninist' understanding of professional revolutionaries⁹.

Both modes of struggle combined to influence the constituent parts of the liberation movement, and a degree of cross-fertilization occurred. With the return of the exiled movements into the country in 1990, the ANC and SACP adopted, at least in theory, more mass participatory methods of organization, whilst the mass movement (including the UDF as a national structure and affiliates such as women's and youth organizations) allowed itself to become absorbed into the ANC or subordinate adjuncts (such as the SA National Civics Association (SANCO), which grouped together the

wide range of local civic groups around the country). The union movement maintained its independence, but arguably became more oligarchic in its structures – both a function of increased size, as well as the increasing influence of ANC/SACP cadres from exile within the movement.

The spirit and ethos of the 1980s in part resonates with the ‘Utopian’ vision of Rick Turner, based on the principles of ‘Workers’ Control’, which in turn resonate with the perspectives of Antonio Gramsci, another important influence on both union and UDF intellectual-activists. These principles and the experiences of the union movement in many ways inspired the international literature on social movement unionism (see Pillay, 2013b). In essence this meant organizations in the workplace¹⁰ – trade unions – interacting with organizations and activists operating within the sphere of social reproduction and state power politics, namely ‘community’ and political organizations of various kinds. This intersection between production politics and state-power politics gave rise to the politically charged and often misleading ‘workerist’ versus ‘populist’ debate in the mid-1980s, which has resurfaced in a different form in the current debates between NUMSA and the SACP (see below). For the moment, it is necessary to explore further the key principles that governed the shopfloor tradition of trade unionism in the 1970s and 1980s, namely the notions of workers’ control and participatory democracy.

Rick Turner, Open Marxism and the New Left

The rise of “New Left” politics in the 1960s (initially in Western Europe and North America) was a reaction to both the failures of corporate capitalism in the West, and ‘state capitalism’ (or statism masquerading as socialism) in Eastern Europe. It arose amidst a range of social and political upheavals, including the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Cuban revolution and subsequent missile crisis, the anti-war movement in solidarity with Vietnam, the US civil rights movement, student uprisings and a rejection of the bureaucratic, patriarchal-conservative and materialistic values of western Christian-capitalism (expressed through the hippie movement and popular culture that emphasised personal freedom).

The New Left embraced a more critical, open Marxism¹¹ as an alternative to the sterile and authoritarian Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism practiced in both Eastern Europe and China. This included

the work of Gramsci, whose notions of workers' control through workers' councils bear a strong resemblance to the participatory-democratic ideas of Rick Turner in South Africa. Both had a profound influence on the student activists who became part of the re-emerging trade union movement, in particular those from Natal, where Turner was based, and where the first wave of worker action and unionism began in the 1970s.

Turner¹² was a highly popular and influential Political Science lecturer at the University of Natal in the late 1960s and early 1970s, before he was banned by the apartheid regime and later assassinated. Turner promoted workers' control of both unions and industry, as a stepping stone towards maximum participatory democracy for society as a whole – a *society-focussed* socialist vision, as opposed to the traditional *statist* emphasis of much of the 'socialist' world at the time. He played a major role in the formation of advice bureaux and unions in Durban, before and after he was banned in 1973, and students of his had an influence in other parts of the country (such as Paula Ensor, who was part of what became the Western Province General Workers' Union). He was also central to the formation of the Institute of Industrial Education (IIE), and the SA Labour Bulletin, which went on to become a key forum for debate and analysis of the union movement.

His brand of open Marxism, primarily influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*, was infused with a 'transcendent' (or if you like 'spiritual') essence that believed in non-violence, and was implicitly critical of the Soviet style of Marxist-Leninism promoted by the SACP, drawing the hostility of the party. Turner admired what he saw developing in Yugoslavia at the time, where the state and market were apparently held in balance by strong workers' participation at workplace level. However, he was cautious about endorsing any particular model of socialism, always adding that he did not have a deep enough knowledge of actual practices in particular countries he admired from afar (including as well Julius Nyerere's *ujamaa* socialist experiments in Tanzania).

Turner, however, was perhaps way ahead of his time. What became known as the shopfloor unions were based on deep organizational strengths that relied on a system of shop steward representation from below, and workers only being allowed to form the executive committees of unions in a part-time capacity (with the administrative backing of full-time paid officials). While Turner's

banning order prevented him from directly participating in union activities, he put a lot of energy into the IIE – seeing workers’ education as a central precondition for the realization of workers’ control and participatory democracy. On this he worked with his wife, Fozia Fisher, and they developed an impressive curriculum that sought to arm workers with the capacity to understand the nature of capitalist society, and learn the tools necessary to build organization as necessary steps towards ultimate emancipation.

State and management repression in the 1970s, however, obliged the emerging union movement to focus on the immediate tasks of organization building, and to place workers’ education on the back burner (at least in those initial years). Indeed, a fierce battle emerged between the Trade Union Advisory Coordinating Committee (TUACC), which became the home of emerging unions in Natal and Transvaal, and the IIE. The TUACC did not think that a broad correspondence course for workers was appropriate, whereas they needed to train workers in the unions in organizational skills as a first priority. Turner might have argued that a broader education and organizational training were not mutually exclusive, but this argument was lost, as the TUACC proceeded to eventually close down the IIE (only the SA Labour Bulletin remained as a separate entity, and survives to this day). However, Turner, under a banning order, could not lead this argument upfront, and his silencing in 1978 by an assassins bullet removed him entirely from the scene.

When TUACC unions and others went on to form the Federation of SA Trade Unions (FOSATU) in 1979, worker education was revived, and while not as elaborate as what was envisaged by Turner and the IIE, it strived to go beyond narrow organizational training. Worker education, however, always assumed a much lower priority in union work compared to the immediate challenges faced by unions. While FOSATU unions did hold to their principles of workers’ control, these were watered down as the unions became bigger and more professionalized, particularly after the formation of COSATU in 1985, and after the unbanning of liberation movements in 1990 (Buhlungu, 2010).

Nevertheless, the shopfloor unions, under the initial influence of the perspectives of Turner and Gramsci, laid one of the foundations of social movement unionism, namely strong, well-organized unions based on shop-floor democracy, transparency and accountability. The other foundation is the broader responsibility of

organized workers to unite the whole working class to fight issues of social reproduction in the communities where they lived, which inevitably meant addressing the question of state power at local and national levels.

Workers' Control or Control of Workers?

The strategic compromise between the shopfloor unions and the UDF (but in reality ANC/SACP) – aligned community or political unions, forged during the critical 1985-1987 period, arguably laid the basis for the death knell of Turner's radical vision of workers' control. What John Saul (1986) called 'a popular-democratic' synthesis connected production politics and broader community/state-power politics. This was meant to avoid the debilitating effects of two types of 'workerism', namely narrow economism (an exclusive focus on the workplace to the exclusion of the broader working class in other spheres of struggle) or a narrow 'syndicalism' (where trade unions act as political vehicles, but to the near exclusion of community or political organizations). At the same time, the debilitating effects of populism (an over-emphasis on broader state-power struggles to the neglect of shopfloor organization) were limited by the unions' insistence on their independence from political actors – principles that became the cornerstone of COSATU. This combination, in theory, envisaged the working class leading the struggle for state power¹³ – a form of anti-systemic social movement unionism (Pillay, 2013b). In reality it was not so simple.

As argued elsewhere (Pillay, 2011), since 1990, when the ANC and SACP were unbanned and became the dominant political forces within the country, and COSATU officially became part of the tripartite alliance, the federation found itself caught between a robust social movement unionism and a tamer political unionism. While increasing inequality and unemployment ensured that workers agitated for a greater share in the spoils of democracy, COSATU at the same time subordinated itself to the ruling party, particularly during election periods, and became enmeshed in institutionalized forums of corporatist decision-making at industry, regional and national levels. In a context of comparatively high but still modest union density of approximately 30 per cent (as opposed to up to 80 per cent in Sweden, the model of successful corporatism during the last century) participation in the ruling party and forums brought some benefits, but turned attention away from building the union

movement.

COSATU itself recognized these dangers and over the past decade continuously resolved to recruit more members, both formal workers and informal workers, as well as rebuild its relationship with other organizations fighting broader working class issues. It has thus far fallen far short of its target of 4 million members by 2015 (current membership stands at about 2 million), with hardly any inroads into the organization of precarious workers. While it has, at times, reached out to other sections of society – such as its campaigns with the TAC against HIV-AIDs, the now-moribund basic income grant (BIG) campaign, and against e-tolling of highways – these have been constrained by its alliance with the ruling party. Its strikes over wage demands have been inwardly focussed and rarely elicited support from communities. The Marikana tragedy revealed the social distance between union leaders and members, as mineworkers rejected the NUM for neglecting their interests, and broke away to form the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCWU) (which is itself experiencing disaffection from members for having weak democratic structures (Fin24, 2014).

Under Vavi's leadership, the federation did try to address these issues through more concerted attempts to reach out to precarious workers, broaden the federation's understanding of environmental issues and food security, and lay the basis for a return to a more robust social movement unionism. At the same time Vavi and affiliates such as NUMSA have been highly critical of government's continued adherence to a neo-liberal economic framework (as well as threats to civil liberties and increased corruption), even as it talks about the need for planning an efficient developmental state and green economic development. This critical stance, however, is not the script drawn up by the SACP, which warned Vavi and NUMSA about departing from the national democratic revolution, and making unreasonable 'socialist' demands on government (Pillay, 2011; SACP, 2013a).

What follows is a discussion of different, inter-related sites of contestation, where the issues of vanguardism and workers' control play themselves out in different ways: firstly, around the meaning of economic transformation (as expressed through the debate on the National Development Plan (NDP), the green economy and nationalization) and secondly, around the political organization of working class counter-hegemony (as expressed through the debate

around COSATU's suspension of its general secretary Vavi, and the possibilities of Left revitalisation outside the Alliance).

The National Development Plan and the art of paradigm maintenance

From the SACP's perspective, they are following a responsible course of action by getting into government and working with the Zuma leadership to radicalize the national democratic revolution – to give substance to a 'second phase' of deeper transformation. In this sense workers' control derives from the centre, where the vanguard of the working class, the SACP, furthers working class interests within government (where inevitably compromises are made in the interests of longer-term influence). The SACP since the ascension of Zuma occupy a number of Cabinet posts, mostly notably that of Higher Education (held by party general secretary Blade Nzimande), Trade and Industry (Rob Davies), Public Works (Thulas Nxesi and Jeremy Cronin), Energy (Ben Martins) and Communications (Yunus Carrim). In addition, it has leaders at all other levels of government, and in parliament. This dispersal of party resources has brought criticism by Vavi and NUMSA, who argue that the SACP has become distracted by government work (to the point of being praise singers), as opposed to building the party as a true vanguard of working class interests (Pillay, 2011).

While acknowledging that the government's new and much-heralded National Development Plan (NDP) – supported by business, the media and the opposition Democratic Alliance, amongst others – has a number of flaws, the SACP (2013a) believes that it lays the basis for a shift to greater planning, and building a developmental state. The SACP (2013b) produced a balanced critique of the NDP that acknowledged positive aspects of the 500 page document, such as the proposals around improving state capacity and spatial development, but agreed with COSATU that the all-important economics chapter retain the essential features of neo-liberalism. The SACP, however, was only moved to make this assessment (after seeming to fall in line with the ANC's adoption of the NDP at its Mangaung conference in December 2012) after NUMSA campaigned vigorously against its economic policy proposals (much of which became part of COSATU's critique) (NUMSA 2013c).

The NDP is a product of the National Planning Commission,

which includes experts from a wide range of disciplines, and chaired by the former minister of Finance under Mbeki, Trevor Manuel, and co-chaired by the now deputy president of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa. For a while it seemed that the comparatively more developmentalist New Growth Path (NGP), crafted by former unionist Ebrahim Patel's Department of Economic Development, along with the second Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP2), drawn up by the Department of Trade and Industry, would become the over-arching policy perspectives of government. However, since 2012—ironically after the Marikana tragedy and the wave of strikes that gripped the country that year – the balance of forces within government tipped back in the favour of Treasury and the minerals and energy complex (MEC), such that the NDP, which hardly acknowledged the existence of the NGP and IPAP2, was favoured, thus re-establishing the hegemony of neo-liberalism and the MEC. As COSATU's Neil Coleman argued, it made no attempt to address social inequality or the creation of meaningful jobs, other than poorly paid jobs in the informal sector (Coleman, 2013).

Indeed, the NDP is a classic example of the art of paradigm maintenance as perfected by bodies such as the World Bank (see Wade, 1995). The commission drew in a wide range of credible people to give it legitimacy, and while some proposals are indeed worthwhile, they are all embedded in a neo-liberal green economy perspective that maintains the essentials of the status quo. For example, proposals around climate change and the green economy start off impressively in the NDP. There is a deep analysis of the climate crisis, which is in keeping with current levels of knowledge within the environmental movement, and an acknowledgement of the problem of inaction by governments and corporations around the world. However, this impressive insight is effectively washed away by the imperatives of growth and business-as-usual within the confines of the MEC (Rudin, 2013)¹⁴.

Paradigm maintenance involves both ideological sleights of hand, and processes that deflect criticism to committees that either never meet, or meet with little consequence. As such COSATU's misgivings around the economics chapter, expressed at a special tripartite meeting in August 2013 to resolve the impasse (which NUMSA did not attend) were deftly consigned to a special committee which is in no hurry to meet – allowing the ANC to position the NDP as its policy platform in the run-up to the 2014 elections, with

endorsement from its alliance partners (Zuma, 2014). While neither COSATU nor NUMSA focussed on the climate change aspects of the NDP, NUMSA has been at the forefront of developing counter-proposals on the green economy. This is the beginning of a new direction in thinking for the labour movement, as it increasingly sees the crisis of capitalism as a social as well as an ecological crisis.

Labour and the Green Economy

A range of civil society organizations, including some trade unions, came together in 2011 to form the Climate Jobs Campaign, to address the fear that the transition to ‘green jobs’ will be market-driven. Research findings have indicated that jobs in renewable energy sectors, including the building of wind, wave tide and solar power, the renovation and insulation of homes and offices, and the provision of public transport, could create 3.7 million decent jobs based on the principles of ecological sustainability, social justice and state intervention. The campaign has since been focused around the demand for One Million Climate Jobs, as an achievable first step towards a just transition to fight both unemployment and climate change. Research conducted for the campaign has shown how resources can be diverted towards “decent, people - and publicly driven jobs that reduce the causes and impacts of climate change” (One Million Climate Jobs Campaign, 2013: 13). The around R92 billion needed for a million climate jobs, the research has shown, can come from a range of sources, where current priorities are shifted, including: a tax on idle bank deposits (R48 billion); progressive taxation (R13.5-20 billion); increased financial transaction tax (R48 billion); a carbon tax (R82 billion); halting capital flight (R100 billion a year); re-allocating investments away from coal as well as electricity towards ferrochrome and aluminium industries; a levy on key industrial electricity consumers (R8.5 billion); pension funds and prescribed assets (R140 billion in loans); under-utilised UIF surpluses (R6-9 billion per year) (One Million Climate Jobs Campaign, 2013).

Clearly, there is a growing movement showing how shifted priorities and political will can generate the ideas and resources necessary to create meaningful alternatives. This campaign, however, has yet to take root within the labour movement itself, which may be related to COSATU’s continued embeddedness in the tripartite alliance. As noted above, organized labour has kept a distance from

NGOs and social movements that have a transformative agenda, and are critical of the ANC.

The labour movement has, in recent years, begun to take environmental issues more seriously. In 2013, COSATU published a policy paper on the environment, which raised critical issues regarding a just transition from the current economic paradigm, to that of a low carbon economy. However, as Cock (2013) points out, COSATU is caught between a reformist position – as exemplified by the NUM (and environmental NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund) which seeks accommodation within the logic of green capitalism, market based solutions such as carbon trading, and technologies such as carbon capture and storage – and a transformative position, exemplified by NUMSA and NGOs such as Earthlife Africa and Groundwork, which stress the need for a class analysis, and the recognition that the capitalist system is at the heart of the crisis of climate change. Nevertheless, despite these differences within COSATU, the federation’s 2011 Climate Change Policy Framework identifies capitalism as the problem, and rejects market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions. However, to date NUMSA is the only affiliate that has taken climate change and renewable energy seriously, and come up with clear proposals towards a low carbon future.

The government’s market-based proposals around renewable energy gives private companies (Independent Power Producers) the lead in providing alternatives such as “onshore wind, concentrated solar thermal, solar photovoltaic, biomass, biomass, landfill gas and small hydro” (NUMSA, 2012: 1). NUMSA’s “socially owned” alternative involves, public, community and collective ownership of land sites that can produce renewable energy; social ownership of utilities that generate, transmit and distribute energy; social ownership and control of fossil fuel industry, such as coal and synthetic fuel, to harness their revenues and fund renewable alternatives; local content requirements in the building of a renewable energy manufacturing base, in order to create local jobs; the creation of municipal solar and wind parks; the use of workers’ pension funds to finance socially-owned renewable companies; the promotion of gender equity at all levels of the occupational ladder in such companies; and the setting up of a RE-bid Watch network, in collaboration with local and international friends of NUMSA, to monitor the bidding process around government tenders for the provision of renewable energy

(NUMSA, 2012).

In these proposals NUMSA makes an implicit distinction between *social* ownership, which involves maximum democratic participation from below (by workers and citizens) and *state* ownership, which is often bureaucratic control over public resources, increasingly within a framework of market principles where workers are exploited, and domestic consumers fleeced in the interests of large corporations, as is the case of the state-owned power utility Eskom, and the Central Energy Fund (CEF). NUMSA's proposals give substance to its more general views on nationalization, where in contrast to the state-controlled 'nationalization' of the EFF (2013), it calls for *worker-controlled* nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy. In its Secretariat Report to the December special congress it states: "We know that nationalisation by itself is not necessarily in the interests of the working class.....So, whilst Numsa's position is a clear class position, the position of the EFF is not.....The EFF is explicitly anti-capitalist but it is not socialist.....it does not clarify what kind of society it is struggling for" (NUMSA, 2013d: 23).

While NUMSA has declared itself to be 'socialist', it is itself only beginning to flesh out what that may mean in concrete terms. A 'socially owned' and 'workers controlled' orientation seems more in accordance with a bottom-up ecosocialist (or eco-Marxist) approach promoted by the DLF (2011), which NUMSA does not yet explicitly embrace, as opposed to the union's 'Marxist-Leninist' discourse that is normally (but not necessarily) associated with bureaucratic statism (see below). Nevertheless, NUMSA's emerging alternative vision means that, as before, it has taken the lead in the development of policies which could have a major impact on COSATU's own policies. While policy influence on the state through the tripartite alliance looks increasingly unlikely, the key question is whether NUMSA and other more radical affiliates of COSATU will become hegemonic within the federation, or whether they are pushed out of the federation by those closely aligned to the Zuma-SACP class project.

Vavi, NUMSA and the fragmentation of COSATU

While the breakdown of relations within the tripartite alliance has been simmering for a number of years (see Pillay, 2011), this has spilled over into COSATU itself, with NUMSA (2013a+c)

accusing the SACP of being at the forefront of divisions within the working class. In the one corner is a dominant SACP-aligned group of affiliates – led by COSATU president S’dumo Dlamini, and supported by among others the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) and the SA Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) – offering relatively uncritical support to the Zuma-led ANC, while in the other is the more independent grouping led by the recently suspended COSATU general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, and supported by NUMSA eight other affiliates¹⁵.

Vavi was suspended by the COSATU central committee (composed of the top officials of each affiliate) in August 2013, after he admitted to having a sexual relationship with a subordinate he had previously hired, in the COSATU offices. This followed a previous attempt by his detractors to have him investigated for malpractices regarding the purchasing of the new head office building, amongst other things. Vavi’s woes began during the run-up to the September 2012 COSATU congress, when there was a concerted attempt by the SACP faction to oppose his re-election as general secretary. When it became clear (from the applause of delegates) that Vavi had overwhelming support among ordinary members of the federation (but not amongst the affiliates’ office bearers), a deal was struck whereby none of the top positions were contested. In exchange it was decided to support Jacob Zuma’s re-election as ANC president a few months later (Pillay, 2013a). However, Vavi’s continued outspoken criticism of government policy and corruption kept him in the sights of his detractors, leading to his eventual suspension. In January 2014 he was finally charged with bringing the federation into disrepute, and will have to appear before a disciplinary committee (Marrian, 2014)¹⁶.

In his defence NUMSA and other affiliates¹⁷ demanded a special congress of COSATU to discuss the suspension. For them this was a question of workers’ control. Such a suspension was clearly a political vendetta, and ought not to be decided by a few officials at a central committee meeting. Worker delegates should have an opportunity to debate the matter (NUMSA 2013a). However, for former unionist and ANC general secretary Gwede Mantashe, the Vavi affair proved the opposite – that over-reliance on individuals, in particular officials such as general secretaries, violated the principles of workers’ control. In an address to the Police and Prisons Civil

Rights Union (POPCRU) at the time of the suspension, Mantashe reminded delegates of the long-held COSATU principle that elected worker leaders, such as the union president, should hold more power than general secretaries, who are paid officials. Instead, the affiliates allowed the opposite to happen, leading to too much power being vested in individuals such as Vavi (Marrian, 2013).

As NUMSA (2013a) subsequently pointed out, Mantashe was being disingenuous. While in the beginning many general secretaries of the re-emerging shopfloor unions were (usually white) intellectuals, and full-time officials who often did not have a vote in meetings, the office bearers were workers who, in principal, controlled the unions but in a part-time capacity (Friedman, 1987). Indeed, it was Mantashe's own former union, the NUM that led the way with full-time paid office-bearers, which is now the norm. Today, all of the top positions are elected at union congresses so the distinction no longer applies. What Mantashe was doing, as ANC general secretary and a former SACP chairperson, was to legitimise the marginalisation of Vavi, and promote the profile of COSATU president Dlamini, in line with the political interests of the ANC and SACP¹⁸.

While the initial allegations against Vavi (concerning the purchase of COSATU house) were greeted with suspicion by his supporters, the subsequent charges of sexual misconduct lost him much sympathy, despite his public apology. Gender activists in particular were incensed that, once again, a man had abused his position of authority over women. While this is a common occurrence in the unions, including amongst Vavi's accusers, he was expected to live by a higher standard. In addition, he gave his detractors a loaded gun with which to shoot him, thus undermining his ability to continue to lead COSATU in a progressive direction. Instead, the federation has now been captured by the conservative SACP faction, which has blocked all moves to convene a special congress, leaving Vavi to face a disciplinary hearing he now seems unlikely to win. Whether Vavi will cut his losses and leave the federation, and take the bold step to lead the process towards a new leftwing political organization¹⁹, or wait for a COSATU special congress to vindicate him (as his union allies are demanding) remains to be seen (see note 15).

In the meantime, NUMSA made the bold move to break away from the ANC and SACP at its December 2013 special congress,

and continues to support Vavi within the federation. The union also decided to broaden its scope of operation, bringing it into increased conflict with other affiliates such as the NUM (Paton, 2013a). While NUMSA resolved not to leave COSATU, but instead campaign to win over the federation to its positions by the time it convenes its next congress in 2015, the current leadership of COSATU may feel tempted to expel its largest affiliate (which continues to withhold its affiliation fees until a special congress is held). The overwhelming support among NUMSA's delegates at the congress for their resolutions, after a few months of extensive debate and deliberations in the regions, may however give pause for thought (Paton, 2013b). Prior to the special congress, the SACP (2013a+b; Nicholson, 2013) tried to sow seeds of division within NUMSA, calling on delegates to reject proposals to leave the Alliance, but came out empty-handed. This has given NUMSA's detractors some food for thought, while NUMSA in turn is banking on key SACP leaders in affiliates like the NEHAWU) and SADTU), who run the unions in a more vanguardist fashion, leaving their unions to become ANC MPs after the April 2014 elections. This could open the way for the progressive faction in the federation to gain ground. This drama is likely to play out in 2014²⁰.

NUMSA started 2014 determined to begin implementing its resolutions, and pave the way for a united front of opposition forces and a movement for socialism. It held its week-long second political school for shop stewards, with invited guests from other affiliates, and engagement with a variety of civil society organizations (Ngobese, 2014). The intention was to develop a critical Marxist perspective within the union, and give shop stewards the ability to engage in discussions around the shape and content of a united front of organizations, and a new socialist formation. It will also have to decide how it relates to potential suitors on the left, such as the EFF, WASP and the DLF, who are all eager to attach themselves to the union and its mass base.

Left revitalization – or old wine in new bottles?

The ANC's expulsion in 2012 of youth league leader Julius Malema, whose radical rhetoric around nationalization and land expropriation caused jitters within the investor community, gave birth to the militant Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, which has drawn support amongst sections of the poor, including within

the Marikana community where mineworkers were killed by police in August 2012. The EFF are poised to become the third largest party in the national parliament, and may hold the balance of power in many provinces, including the industrial heartland of Gauteng.

The Workers and Socialist Party (WASP), which also has a presence amongst Marikana workers, was formed in 2013 by the the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), and will contest the 2014 elections. The DSM was initially part of the Democratic Left Front (DLF), a loose coalition of small, diverse left groupings formed in 2011. WASP's public profile increased during the latter half of 2013 when the ANC's Gwede Mantashe blamed 'foreign agents' for the troubles at Marikana – referring in particular to Liv Shange, a Swedish national now married to a South African, who plays a key role in WASP. She featured prominently in the news when the state seemed poised to deny her re-entry into the country with her South African children after a holiday abroad (and after a public campaign she was allowed back in (WASP, 2013a)).

All these formations, from the SACP on the centre-left to WASP on the far left, invoke the spirits of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin in support of their cause. Indeed, leading members of most of these groups were in the past within the fold of the ANC and SACP, and many still owe allegiance to the heroes of the liberation movement such as Oliver Tambo, the former ANC president, and SACP leaders Chris Hani and Joe Slovo. While the EFF and WASP have yet to test their support in the 2014 national elections, they still have a long way to go to match the presence of the major players within the organized working class, namely the SACP and its supporters and detractors within COSATU.

While thus far the EFF have been rebuffed by the left in COSATU, who view Malema and his acolytes with suspicion (as predatory aspirant elites in radical garb), the DLF and WASP hope to draw support from a possible split in the federation. Indeed, for many on the independent left, the sharpening of differences within the Alliance is a hopeful sign that at last the scales are falling out of the eyes of major sections of the working class, as they see that the ANC/SACP emperor has no clothes, and it may be time to move on to the formation of an independent working class party that has its roots in the labour movement.

Many Vavi supporters within COSATU, however, remain cautious towards these new formations, feeling as they do the heat

of SACP supporters within their ranks who are overtly hostile. Any hint at this stage that the critical voice within COSATU is linked to outside groupings strengthens the view within the SACP faction that at worst an ‘anti-majoritarian’ liberalism, supported by imperialism, is at work here (under the guise of left politics), or at best misguided ‘ultra-leftists’ or ‘syndicalists’ are leading workers astray with adventurist politics (see for example SACP, 2013c; Nicholson, 2013; NEHAWU, 2014). The lone exception thus far is NUMSA, which, since its December 2013 congress break with the ANC and SACP, has indicated a willingness to engage with all left formations.

In other words, there is a revival of the debate of the 1980s between the left in FOSATU, who favoured an independent union-led political strategy (either directly through unions or through a working class party), and the SACP-aligned left within the UDF, which sought working class hegemony through the tripartite alliance led by the ANC. The leading affiliate in FOSATU back then was the Metal and Allied Workers’ Union (MAWU), which became the core of NUMSA by the time of COSATU’s launch in 1985. As argued above, a key difference between then and now is that the left in MAWU had a more diverse intellectual lineage, drawing inspiration from among others, Rick Turner and Antonio Gramsci (Forrest, 2011). Today, the dominant left paradigm across COSATU is that of ‘Marxist-Leninism’, at least at the level of ideological discourse. This is an indication of the SACP’s success in immersing itself in the union movement since its unbanning in 1990. The party positioned itself as the key intellectual reference point, such that today no-one in COSATU, on either side of the divide, deviates from the Marxist-Leninist discourse framework derived from the SACP – even if the actual practice of the SACP and COSATU is more social-democratic and to an extent corporatist. Marxist-Leninism, however understood, has become the hegemonic political discourse within the union movement – and the argument is over who has the *correct* Leninist analysis of the current South African political economy, often with reference to SACP stalwarts such as Joe Slovo and Chris Hani.

The SACP’s Marxist-Leninism, of course, is of the mechanical Stalinist lineage, given that throughout its history the party followed all the twists and turns of the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the publication of Joe Slovo’s *Has Socialism Failed* in 1990, the SACP began to shed some of

this baggage, although this has re-asserted itself in recent years (Williams 2008). The other Marxist-Leninist heritage, Trotskyism, was tolerated for a time within the SACP during the 1990s and early 2000s, but has since been marginalised. It maintains a presence within the broad DLF coalition (alongside the more dominant and open 'eco-socialist' Marxism), and completely dominates the ideological outlook of WASP (2013b), which has its roots in the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC (historically aligned to the Militant Tendency in the UK) (see Leggassick 2007). The EFF (2013) has combined a professed allegiance to 'Marxist-Leninism' (derived from the SACP) with the theories of Franz Fanon as well as the political practice of the assassinated socialist president of Burkino Faso, Thomas Sankara. Its militant black nationalist-socialist orientation is also influenced by the murdered black consciousness (BC) leader Steve Biko, given its absorption of the BC group the Left Imbizo. There are, of course, a number of other Trotskyist groupings which refused to join the DLF, such as the Workers' Vanguard League, but their presence within the working class is virtually non-existent. All of these currents feed into the discussion within the union movement.

With the exception of the more flexible eco-socialist Marxism current within the DLF (2011)²¹, then, the dominant discourse and practice within the left remains located within Lenin's notion of democratic-centralist politics. As such these formations resemble old wine in new bottles. As the preceding discussion shows, NUMSA has reinvoked the principles of workers' control in various ways, and, despite its 'Marxist-Leninist' discourse, is well poised to revive its participatory democratic ethos, and play a significant role in reinvigorating working class politics in South Africa. Indeed, some may argue that there is no Chinese Wall between a Marxist-Leninist vanguard (as opposed to *vanguardist*) approach, and participatory democracy (see Leggassick, 2007), as the example of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala (until recently when it lost power) indicates (Williams, 2008).

A new counter-hegemony: building an eco-socialist, feminist and participatory democractic politics

There is a vast difference between traditional twentieth century Marxist-Leninist (or indeed Social Democratic) socialist struggles and a new form of twenty-first century 'eco-socialist' struggle. The former is *state-centric*, and facilitated by a hierarchical

(vanguardist or mass based) political party, while the latter is *society-centric*, and facilitated by mass participatory democracy.

A society focus entails a mobilised civil society that keeps elected representatives (in state institutions, private corporations and organisations) accountable, through maximum participatory democracy at all levels of social life. Maximum democracy implies maximum access to information and education, such that ordinary citizens are able to make their needs and aspirations the centre of public policy. This participatory-democratic socialist vision was inspired among others by Rick Turner and the New Left politics emerging around the world during the 1960-70s, and within the UDF in the 1980s. It conceptualized ‘working class politics’ in the broadest terms, including the politics of production (the struggle for workers’ control at the workplace) and the politics of social reproduction (the struggle for citizens’ control in the political and social spheres).

Such a democracy, when combined with a global, expansive, and transformative socialist vision, will inevitably lead to a progressive, redistributive political economy that is sensitive to social and ecological sustainability. For writers such as Foster (2009), such a sustainable human development vision, which combines liberty with equality, was in keeping with that of Marx and Engels, the key inspiration for socialism during the past century.

Statism, as Wright (2010) argues, was during the past century mistaken for ‘socialism’, whether of the hard Soviet-style versions, or the softer social-democratic types found in Western Europe. The Soviet form of statism (still practised in countries like China and North Korea and to a lesser extent Cuba) was pioneered by Josef Stalin (drawing on Lenin’s emphasis on the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’), and disempowered the working class and ordinary citizens, by placing full authority in the hands of a substantially unaccountable state bureaucracy and ruling party (despite a substantial redistribution of the social surplus and the reduction of inequality). Social democracies such as Sweden during the past century achieved considerable equality within the context of a multi-party democracy and, for a time, the iron triangle of labour-state-business corporatism – but at the expense of an active citizenry and workers’ control at the workplace (in the context of an economy dominated by a few large corporations) (Esping-Anderson, 1990).

The form of struggle has a direct bearing on the outcome,

following the Gandhian principle ‘be the change you want to see’. This is a long-term battle that is already taking shape in discussions and activism for example, at the World Social Forum, as well as in places where the subordinate classes have some power, as in Bolivia and Kerala, India. In the wake of a global economic and ecological crisis that has de-legitimized the certainties of neoliberal growth economics, there is a growing awareness about the need for alternatives to the growth-at-all costs paradigm that consumes fast depleting and polluting fossil fuels. In the words of Bolivian president Evo Morales (2009: 168),

It is nothing new to live well. It is simply a matter of recovering the life of our forebears and putting an end to the kind of thinking that encourages individualistic egoism and the thirst for luxury. Living well is not living better at the expense of others. We need to build a communitarian socialism in harmony with Mother Earth.

Such a radical eco-socialist agenda requires a much more imaginative counter-hegemonic alliance than the one in which COSATU is trapped at present. A new alliance of forces is needed to tackle the roots of fossil capitalism. COSATU, and in particular its key affiliate NUMSA, is beginning to understand the inter-linkages between workers’ exploitation, social oppression, and ecological devastation. However, COSATU is still seeking solutions within the confines of the Alliance, and its state-oriented developmental path that rests on the minerals-energy-financial complex, notwithstanding grudging nods to a green economy. While the NUMSA breakaway from the Alliance opens up new possibilities, the union still needs to travel a fair distance away from the statist, Marxist-Leninist remnants of its political discourse.

Only a decisive move out of the unions’ location amongst relatively privileged core workers, as well as a final realization among the broader working class that the ANC-Alliance can no longer be a route out of poverty and social marginalization will bring about a realignment of forces within the country. NUMSA has begun that journey. However, given the ANC-SACP’s history of successfully holding the centre together, despite continued turbulence within its ranks, it may be a while yet before the rest of organized labour drops the scales from its eyes, and sees opportunities for resurrecting a more robust social movement unionism, in pursuit of Turner’s vision

of workers' control and participatory democracy throughout society.

Endnotes

1. Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, devan.pillay@wits.ac.za.
2. Vanguardist signifies a top-down form of decision-making by the party elite, with only a pretence of democratic participation from below. It is a debasement of the principles of the vanguard and 'democratic centralism', which in Leninist theory at least specifies democratic participation from below before final decisions are made., and for some Leninists allows for multi-party democracy (see Leggassick, 2007). The Kerala Communist Party of India (Marxist) is said to combine both democratic centralism and participation in the best sense of a vanguard (see Williams, 2008) although this is contested.
3. The FCWU, in an attempt to overcome state obstacles to non-racial unions, formed the African FCWU (AFCWU) to represent african workers, although in practice they functioned as one union.
4. These, such as the 1955 Congress of the People process, were either limited top-down processes of legitimation, or plans that were never put into full effect for various reasons.
5. Including the ANC-SACP as well as the breakaway Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). The exiled black consciousness movement had a much more amorphous understanding of socialism, which often bore close resemblance to the non-Marxist 'African socialism' in vogue during the 1960s and 70s.
6. See Wright (2010) for a full discussion of these concepts. Wright posits that socialist practice is/was more often than not a *hybrid* of state and society, as well as the market – with society hegemonic.
7. This view was particularly expressed in the Western Cape UDF, where an independent Marxist or socialist politics was more prevalent (author's own participant observations). Jeremy Cronin and Raymond Suttner, both active participants in the UDF, often propagated the SACP view inside the country. Cronin, based in Cape Town in the 1980s, was particularly adept at defending the party line while seeming to concede ground to the participatory-democratic perspective – and as such could be said to represent a more nuanced SACP position (as opposed to the cruder Stalinist interpretations often found in exile, and the party journal *African Communist* (see for example Nyawuza, 1985)).
8. 'Working class' is meant as a broad cross section of citizens in urban and rural settings that suffer under the whip of capitalism, including salaried or waged workers (those employed in the formal sector), informal sector workers (or 'self-employed') and their dependents (including students, housewives, the unemployed, the infirm and pensioners). Some prefer the term 'subordinate classes' to include peasants who work the land for themselves – however, for our purposes, because we are dealing mainly with the urban areas, and because of the massive decline of the South African peasantry, the term working class is preferred.
9. The various Trotskyist groups, being Leninists, agreed with the principle

of democratic centralism, but disagreed with the idea that the SACP constituted a 'true' working class party. Legassick (2007: 549-553) points out that this perspective was based on a static reading of Lenin's highly influential *What Is To Be Done*, written in 1902 under the influence of Kautsky, and ignores his later emphasis, in responses to criticism of elitism and the events of 1905, on the importance of worker-intellectuals and the class struggle experiences of workers in generating a socialist consciousness.

10. For some, the term point of production is used, but given the rise of the services sector in the economy, this can be misleading. However, Burawoy's (1985) term 'production politics' is retained, to refer to all workplace struggles, whilst state-power politics during this period includes all community struggles which were oriented towards the question of state power (i.e. which were implicitly or explicitly anti-apartheid). Of course, during the post-apartheid era this distinction becomes more complex, such that the politics of social reproduction (community struggles around various social issues such as health, housing, sanitation, education, etc) are not necessarily anti-systemic (or oriented towards capturing state power as such).
11. An Open Marxism is non-dogmatic and engages positively with other schools of thought. In this instance it interfaced, not always explicitly, with various forms of anarchism, including anarcho-sindicalism.
12. This short exposition is based on the 1980 edition of Turner's seminar *The Eye of the Needle*, which includes a biographical introduction by Tony Morphet, as well as a comprehensive recent MA thesis by William Hemingway Keniston (2010), who reviews his work in light of developments over the past 30 years, including various assessments of Turner's ideas and influence at various points. Only the key ideas of Turner are presented here for the purposes of this article.
13. See Pillay 1989 for a full discussion of the popular-democratic synthesis.
14. According to the Department of Environmental Affairs, progress has been made in shifting government priorities towards green issues since 2010, but this is an uphill battle.
15. These include the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), South African Catering Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), South African State and Allied Workers Union (SASAWU), Communication Workers Union (CWU), South African Football Players Union (SAFPU) and Public and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (PAWUSA).
16. These include the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), South African Catering Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), South African State and Allied Workers Union (SASAWU), Communication Workers Union (CWU), South African Football Players Union (SAFPU) and Public and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (PAWUSA).
17. On 29 January the nine affiliates came together and demanded that

the special congress be held by March 2014, to chart the way forward, including electing new office bearers. If this demand was not met these affiliates would convene their own special COSATU congress (Joint Press statement, 29 January 2014)

18. Mantashe subsequently backtracked, and urged an amicable settlement on the Vavi matter in the interests of worker unity – particularly during the run-up to national elections where the ANC needed the support of a united COSATU. His overtures however were rebuffed by the anti-Vavi faction, who were determined to oust him. Critics believe that the fingerprints of SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande, an avid supporter of Zuma, are all over this affair.
19. This was suggested by EFF leader Julius Malema in an interview with PowerFM on 28 January 2014.
20. Discussions with NUMSA officials who prefer to remain anonymous.
21. This current has become somewhat less prominent in 2014, given the prominence of those from the Trotskyist tradition, some of whom, controversially, support active engagement with the EFF as an apparently ‘left’ split from the ANC.

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