



What's Left of the South Africa Left?

Dan Connell, Against the Current, No. 58, September/October 1995

THE SOUTH AFRICAN left is going through a profound transition from an underground resistance movement to an open political party. At this point, it has one foot in the new Government of National Unity and the other in a restive popular base that is increasingly impatient for structural economic and social change. Some critics argue that the left has so muted its politics in the protracted transition to democracy that it has lost its identity as a revolutionary force. Others say the left is on track to complete the main tasks of the National Democratic Revolution and to position itself for the struggle for socialism. The truth, as usual, is more complex than these alternatives suggest.

Viewed from one angle the left appears to be in a downward spiral from which it might not recover:

- * The national liberation movement, embodied in the African National Congress (ANC), is drifting steadily rightward.
- * The South African Communist Party (SACP), submerged in the ANC, seems to lack the distinct identity, profile and program.
- * The small parties to the 'left' of the SACP exist only on the margins and have little relevance to South Africa's political life, whatever their positions and programs.
- * And the popular movement, once the driving force in the liberation struggle, is in tatters worn down by the transition process, emasculated by a totalizing liberation movement, stripped of its best leaders by the new government and by capital, and abandoned by foreign patrons whose funding now flows to the government, if it flows at all.

From another perspective, however, the left can be seen as in a strong position, perhaps the strongest ever, to effect deep-going structural economic and social change:

- * The liberation movement now holds the presidency, the overwhelming majority of seats in

Parliament, the majority of cabinet positions and all but two regional governments, with the SACP in a pivotal role to influence their direction.

* The party's membership has skyrocketed from 2,000 at the time of the unbanning in 1990 to more than 75,000, though it is anyone's guess as to how many are active.

* The commitment to democratization is hegemonic in the culture at large and can only be attacked obliquely.

* A comprehensive Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) is on the table, both as a program of action for the left and as a benchmark against which to measure the ANC-led Government of National Unity's performance.

* The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) remains strong, particularly at the shop steward level, if also confronted with new challenges and problems.

* The culture of mass engagement is deeprooted and widely shared, even if many popular organizations and institutions that developed during the anti-apartheid struggle are in crisis, and even if the new government is ill-disposed toward independent, popular initiatives.

* And a lively exchange of ideas is in progress within the broad left that ranges from strategy and tactics in the current political transition to the definition of socialism itself, as well as the road to get there.

Both views of the state of the left are true, as far as they go: the left is struggling to catch up with new challenges and tasks, but it is stronger than it seems at first glance. Part of the problem in assessing the left lies in recognizing the limits to what is possible in this period, in both the South African and the global post-Cold War contexts.

Certain aspects of the left's apparent weakness are also the inevitable consequence of the prolonged transition to democracy that got underway in 1990 and that will continue well past the elections of 1999. Others, however, are the result of miscalculations and tactical errors made during the early phase of this transition and need either to be compensated for or corrected. In any event, the South African left is entering uncharted territory at a moment when there are no simple signposts or ready formulas to guide the way. Under these circumstances, it is far too early to render final judgments.

The democratic opening that culminated in the 1994 elections represented neither a decisive victory nor an absolute defeat. As a result, the transition reflects the continuation of a struggle in new form between essentially the same class antagonists, albeit with less stark and absolute racial definition. To go forward, the left will need new leadership, new cadres, new ideas, increased strength in the popular movement, which will have to be mobilized in new forms around new issues and objectives, and sustained solidarity from abroad. It will need to contest for power on new and unfamiliar terrain, for which it is not well-prepared, and it will have to

operate on several levels at once against an opponent much better suited to this and far better financed, though it is worth recalling that this same opponent once held a similar advantage in the antiapartheid struggle.

A key challenge is to shift this terrain beyond government and the multiplying, expert-driven forums being set up to deal with (and absorb) the principal contradictions that divide South African society and to extend the struggle back into the factories, the communities, the schools and other such venues, where the left has latent strength and considerably more experience. This is complicated by strong opposition to extraparliamentary popular protest from within the liberation movement itself. Mandela has characterized it as “social anarchy.”

But protest is only a piece of the challenge; organizing that produces tangible changes in people's lives is the central task, whether or not it takes protest to achieve it. The ability to do this effectively is hampered as much by the disarray in which the popular movement now finds itself as by actions or policies of the government. If one is looking for measuring sticks by which to judge the strength of the left and its prospects for the future, its ability to reconstruct and lead the popular movement over the coming two to three years will be one of the best tests, though the simultaneous efforts to transform the state, the armed forces, the civil service, and the legal and judicial systems, while also writing a new constitution, shouldn't be underrated. If the left fails in these challenges, there is no shortage of demagogues ready to step in to whip up popular dissatisfaction for their own quite different ends.

A seven-week tour of South Africa revealed a decidedly mixed political bag. There was cynicism and disillusionment among some, particularly on the left fringes (within and without the SACP). There was deep frustration in many of the townships and informal settlements among those who had hoped for tangible results from the elections a year ago and who have seen little or nothing come of them yet.

Many parliamentarians from the left were running so fast to keep up with the pace of their daily workloads that they had precious little time to reflect on the situation long enough to develop and articulate new strategies, let alone to assist in the sort of mass mobilization that had characterized most of their work in a previous political life. It was in the factories and the communities, however, that I found the most compelling evidence that there is still life on the left.

The SACP is far the largest and most influential left formation, dwarfing its rivals. In addition to its mass membership, the party has a substantial following in COSATU and in the townships, where it is highly respected for its role in the antiapartheid struggle. There remain a handful of parties in what South Africans term the “far left,” each with several hundred members. These include Neville Alexander's Workers Organization of South Africa (WOSA), which has its main base in the Cape Town area, and Comrades for a Workers Government, which has some support within COSATU unions.

The ANC, as a multiclass, diverse political front, contains other left currents, but it does not permit formal caucuses or fractions within it, so it is difficult to gauge their size or impact. Apart from this, South Africa has a broad socialist culture that includes a fairly large number of nonparty individuals involved in left publications, NGOs, environmental groups and so on.

There are also the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the remnants of the Black Consciousness movement grouped in the Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO), both of which retain a modest following in the townships, particularly among disaffected youth, and in NACTU, a declining Black Consciousness-oriented trade union confederation. Though the PAC and AZAPO received a minuscule share of the vote in the April 1994 elections, they remain a potential rallying point for resurgent racial nationalism in the event the ANC-led government fails to produce concrete results from its present policy of negotiation and compromise.

At this stage, however, although there is a spirited debate over the quality and extent of the SACP's independent role and identity in this process, few seriously contest its position as the leading force on the left. As journalist Hein Marais, who is otherwise highly critical of the party, put it: "The SACP is the reservoir of Left history and aspirations in South Africa."

Marais is one of many independents on the left who characterize the party as "paralyzed" by its subordinate relationship to the ANC. He argues that the left current within the party needs to be strengthened to challenge the rightward trend of the ANC and to provide effective leadership to a reemerging mass movement, if it hopes to keep a socialist project viable.

Other left critics within the party, notably in NUMSA, the metalworkers' union, argue that it is time for the party to either leave the strategic alliance with the ANC and COSATU or act to transform it in such a way as to give the party a far more independent identity as a working-class formation within the alliance.

Already the effort by capital to blur racial divisions while heightening class differences is evident. While the gap between white and black income is closing, the overall gap between rich and poor is widening. Few doubt that capital's main strategy is now to nurture and coopt the new black elite.

The principal debate on the left comes up over whether or not the ANC leadership is on an unalterably rightward course and whether it is time for the SACP to come out of the closet and contend for power on its own before this emerging elite is so thoroughly entrenched that such struggle will become impossible. This might involve running candidates in elections in some areas. It might involve staking out independent positions on critical issues of the day, such as health policy, housing, access to higher education or the privatization of key utilities or enterprises. Certainly, it would involve playing a much more critical, public role toward the ANC and the government and, according to most left critics, would have to include a more explicit programmatic commitment to struggle for socialism.

Party leaders, for their part, insist that this is no time to breakup the alliance. They argue that the national liberation struggle is not yet concluded, that the movement holds position now but not power, and that it is by no means settled how the struggle for democracy will come out. However, in a departure from past theoretical insistence that the lines between the two revolutionary stages are fairly sharp, they maintain that it is possible and necessary to struggle for socialism in the present transition period, and they insist that the party is already playing an independent role in pushing for socialist-oriented policies within the alliance.

The “Strategy and Tactics” document drafted for the April 1995 party congress—the second open congress since the 1990 unbannings—spells out a number of examples for this, under the call to build socialism now. They center on efforts to roll back or transform the market “decommodifying” sectors of the economy like health care, education and housing and on efforts to “socialize” sections of the economy, by which the party means bring sections of the economy under popular control, not necessarily under the state.

These concepts are premised on the formulation, floated last year in a paper by Jeremy Cronin, recently elected the party’s Deputy General Secretary, that socialism is a transitional stage of development in which elements of both the dying system and that which is emerging coexist, as was the case with the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In this view, the state cannot simply be characterized as a monolithic instrument of class rule, which can be captured or lost by one class (or the party purporting to represent it) in a single, cataclysmic political moment. Rather, it is a complex and continuing site of class struggle.

The main danger of such a formulation, as Cronin himself points out, is “boundless reformism.” At the same time, an important consequence is that it gives the popular movement strategic significance in the struggle for socialism, beyond simply providing the troops for the seizure of state power or the levers to manipulate in support of those already struggling within the state.

The draft document also contains a call to give the struggle against gender oppression far more attention in this and future stages of struggle, insisting that “there can be no consolidation of democracy, still less an effective advance to socialism, unless we also, simultaneously, overcome patriarchy and actively transform gender relations.” The representation of the struggle against patriarchy as a strategic objective is in part a result of internal party struggles during which, among other things, women in the leadership won the right to screen major documents for gender content before they’re circulated and it is increasingly reflected in the speeches and pronouncements of party leaders, women and men. What remains to be seen is how this commitment will be implemented at ground level.

Meanwhile, Cronin and others argue that the party is having considerable influence within the liberation movement now, despite the ANC’s rightward drift, which they readily acknowledge. They point in particular to the RDP, which arose initially out of an attempt by COSATU to draft a pact with the ANC to guarantee that it would not backslide on workers’ issues once in power.

The RDP evolved, with considerable input from the SACP and with a high degree of popular consultation, into the program of the ANC, though it was later stripped of much of its class content in a government “white paper” that spelled out the state’s implementation plans. Nonetheless, the base document remains a blueprint for popular mobilization and is the centerpiece of the SACP’s transitional program of action.

“To retreat out of the ANC now,” Cronin continues, “would be to hand victory to our strategic opponents, whose agenda is also to capture the heart and soul of the ANC, and they are having some successes. If the party and the left were to move out of the ANC and constitute some other force the SACP by itself or some kind of new formation, a workers’ party is one that has been offered it would be to play completely into the hands of our opponents. The masses are behind the ANC, and left forces need to be there, where the people are.”

As to suggestions that the party field its own electoral candidates to challenge the ANC, Cronin argues that the people are not prepared for such nonantagonistic competition among allies. To attempt it when people are just beginning to gain experience in electoral politics would open the possibility of even more manipulation by the opposition of the kind that took place in the last round, where the Inkatha Freedom Party of Zulu nationalist Mangosuthu Buthelezi effectively stole the elections in Natal and the ruling National Party manipulated the electorate in the Western Cape by playing to fears of African domination among the “colored” voters, who make up the majority in that region.

Whatever the SACP does as a party, the prospects for it and the left in general will depend very much on the strength and character of the popular movement, which is at a crossroads of its own. The movement has suffered major setbacks, losing not only much of its human and material resources but its sense of purpose and identity.

That this happened is hardly surprising it is a problem that confronts all liberation struggles at the moment when they shift from resistance to governance and become detached from their base. The real question is whether or not the popular movement can be rebuilt in a new way to deal with new conditions and challenges and whether it can do so with enough autonomy from both state and party control that it can generate and sustain its own dynamic momentum.

The popular movement’s problems started with the return of the liberation movement in 1990, which almost immediately took over and dismantled many of the organizations that had powered the protest movement. One of the first to go was the United Democratic Front (UDF), which had served as the umbrella for dozens of proANC, antiapartheid groups and organizations. The unbanning caught many popular movement leaders offbalance people who had what Cronin terms a “Bteam” mentality, seeing themselves as standins for the first string in exile. This was notably the case in the women’s and youth movements, where there had been strong grassroots organizations with their own distinct and diverse agendas, but which were folded into the ANC and then turned almost overnight into vehicles for mobilizing their constituencies for political agendas set at the center, starting with support during the

protracted negotiations and continuing through the national elections. Their main tasks centered on fundraising, membershipbuilding and voter registration.

At their worst, the leagues served then and now merely as platforms on which to advance individual careers and ambitions. “The only thing the Women’s League campaigned for in the early 1990s was greater representation on the ANC delegation at the World Trade Center negotiations, so it became a very elite politics,” says one high level SACP leader.

After waffling for almost two years, COSATU voted to retain the independence of the trade unions and to demand a role as an institutional partner in a strategic alliance with the ANC and the SACP. COSATU now faces problems of coordination among its diverse affiliates, a growing gap between leadership and base, and the need to rapidly develop new layers of leadership at all levels.

But COSATU is better positioned than most popular organizations to deal with this because of its strength on the shop floor, where its leadership is continually renewed. A key issue for the trade unions is how to keep the membership engaged in political struggle when the new tripartite economic forums made up of representatives of business, the state and labor have the effect of marginalizing the base from the process, much as happened to the popular movement during the negotiations prior to the elections.

The communitybased organizations known as civics also decided to stay independent, though they reorganized in 1992 into a unitary structure the South African National Civics Organization (SANCO) that carried with it many of the same centralist tendencies as those in the leagues, squelching local initiatives and in some cases serving as vehicles for careerism. The future of the civics remains unclear as the country heads into local elections, which will add yet another layer to the competing organizations that aspire to represent and respond to community needs. There are already problems at the community level in distinguishing the role of the civics from that of the ANC branches (not to mention the branches of the SACP, whose main task is often to keep the ANC branches alive), and there are now civics forming which are patently undemocratic and antiANC.

All the popular organizations, including the trade unions, were hurt by the movement’s entry into government not only at the national level, but also regionally. Many were stripped of their most skilled and experienced cadres. Even when new layers of leadership existed, as in the trade unions, many lacked specific knowledge of issues coming before them and acted erratically. Some organizations collapsed altogether in the face of these losses, notably in the alternative media. And there was further leakage to business, as people opted for salaried jobs over the movementlevel subsistence wages and lifestyle to which they had been long relegated.

The October local elections will add to this problem, and there will undoubtedly be further losses to business, as the drive by capital to create a new black elite accelerates. Jenny Schreiner, a member of Parliament who sits on the SACP Central Committee, now criticizes the

decision to draw such a large proportion of the party leadership into government. “We weren’t sharp enough to realize that you need to divide your forces and have a contingent of people concentrate on mass work,” she says. Schreiner also terms the decision to fold all the women’s organizations into the ANC Women’s League a “serious mistake.”

One can also bemoan the losses of leadership to what is widely termed the “gravy train,” but, apart from infrequent instances of personal corruption, it is hard to object to them, for access to wellpaid jobs by the black majority, especially Africans, is long overdue. The problem, as one SACP leader put it, is conflating elite affirmative action with structural transformation. It is also unreasonable to expect some activists to continue to work for nexttonothing, as comrades move into cushy jobs. The movement will have to adapt to this and find ways to reward those who choose to stay and slog it out in the trenches.

Those in salaried positions may also have to kick back more than they are doing now to those who remain behind. (I was told that ANC members in government give 10% back to their organization, while SACP members tithe themselves 15%, though I have no idea how SACP members deal with dual obligations.) Allowance will also have to be made for family and other obligations over what is clearly going to be a protracted struggle.

One problem this movement has is too many meetings. As one activist put it, “We equate meetings with democracy.” It is not uncommon to find the most engaged organizers attending two and three meetings each day, including plantbased shop steward meetings, COSATU meetings, ANC branch meetings, SACP branch meetings, civic meetings, executive committee meetings and a host of others, often discussing the same issues. This holds dangerous potential for fostering exclusivity in the political leadership, especially as it affects women.

If the formal commitment to women’s emancipation, so impressive in all the documents this movement produces, is to have any substance, this will have to give, as few women, unless single with independent sources of support, can devote this kind of time to meetings. By way of example, one woman on the SACP Central Committee was pointedly discouraged from running for reelection this year because she was forced to miss many CC meetings due to competing commitments, even though in each instance her reasons were deemed acceptable. She was one of four elected women members (out of thirty) prior to the 1995 congress, and her experience is not untypical. An entire branch of the ANC Women’s League in Johannesburg folded up last year because its members were being pulled in too many directions by competing organizational demands, according to Shamim Meer, one of the branch’s organizers and a founder and former editor of Speak magazine, which also shut down last year.

Related to this is the loss of funding that the popular organizations have suffered. This is a real problem that needs to be addressed, but it also reveals a serious weakness carried over from the antiapartheid era. This movement received more outside funding than any other liberation movement in history, with the possible exception of that in Palestine, and it came to depend on it for its existence. The challenge now is to find ways of operating without largescale outside

funding, to develop a level of selfreliance that permits political independence

Organizations will have to downsize and professionalize, relying more on parttime volunteers and small numbers of fulltime, skilled, paid staff. They will also have to find sources of funding from South African constituencies, a task which could be made easier by new policies at the government level, such as changes in the tax code. However, this will take a recognition by government under pressure from below that the independence of popular organizations is important.

Still, the most serious loss to the popular movement is “the political glue” that held it together, as Hein Marais put it the struggle against formal apartheid. What there is now to replace it is the struggle for economic and social equality manifested most insistently in efforts to improve daily life. The SACP has committed its main efforts in this regard to the RDP, and it will be judged on its ability to make this program work in the interests of the working class and the poor.

The party has targeted the new RDP Councils with representation by all organizations operating in a particular community, from ANC branches and sectoral formations to NGOs and religious institutions as the community forums of the future, where people’s needs will be most clearly articulated and advanced.

Reconstructing a women’s movement will be more difficult, since any attempt to start a national organization is certain to be seen as a challenge to the ANC Women’s League and attacked on that basis. However, the shabby state of the women’s movement now is one of the most serious failures of the left; reviving it may be the left’s biggest challenge.

The most likely scenario will be for organizations of women to develop around specific community issues and concerns, like housing or health care and intersecting with feminist initiatives at specific points rather than maintaining allsided, structured ties, in much the same way that the very strong women’s movement in Brazil developed in the 1980s. These issuebased groups could launch specific campaigns and alliances around common objectives, such as the alliance that developed around the South African Women’s Charter or the more grassrootsbased coalition represented in the National Land Commission.

It was encouraging in this regard to find former activists of the Natal Organization of Women meeting regularly to figure out how to restart the important grassroots mobilizing they were doing in the 1980s before they voted to dissolve the organization into the ANC. The Women’s League never took up the project work that NOW had made the cornerstone of its eminently successful mobilization. Here, too, one question is: what resources will the SACP deploy to further this organizing process, and what will the party do if this provokes the ire of the ANC Women’s League?

The coming years will be a time for consolidation and repositioning for the South African left,

with few dramatic breakthroughs. Instead, there will be critically important but far less visible community organization: institutionbuilding, leadership development and cadre development, as in the early stages of the antiapartheid struggle.

The SACP is talking about running semiannual political schools for activists in the mass movement, though they say they cannot afford a fulltime cadre school. “We have to find a way to develop cadres that can understand how to be active in the new context how to engage the powers that be, whether in the state or outside, without being coopted,” says Langa Zita, who is taking charge of the party’s political education program. “At the political level, we have to defend the space we havethe democratic dispensation,” Zita adds. “But we must seek within that process to consolidate and defend the legitimacy of mass struggle. Once everyone knows that if you provoke the popular masses in South Africa, they will respond, you are creating an environment to begin to think strategically. Without an active base, you are toothless.”

Zita is one of those in the SACP who also argues that the subordination of the party’s identity to the ANC throughout the exile years was a “strategic error,” though he opposes any moves that might jeopardize the alliance. Instead, he says he wants to see the party develop its own mass base, to stand up and criticize Mandela, if that is what seems to be called for, and to act within the ANC as an organized force for working class interests. “The issue is not to break the alliance but to transform it into something like a patriotic front,” he says.

Meanwhile, there is a continuing struggle within the SACP to democratize the party itself. For decades functioning underground on the basis of strict democraticcentralism, with more centralism than democracy, the party is now trying to foster more critical thinking among its members, but old habits die hard.

At a recent party conference in Guateng, the largest of the party’s five regions, participants were broken up into small groups to discuss such issues as how the global situation affects South Africa, what the party means by “socialism,” and how to maintain a working-class bias in the RDP. After nearly an hour, however, the reportback produced little more than regurgitations of the party line. Perhaps the most interesting part came afterward.

First, party leaders critiqued the exercise, noting that too many big questions had been posed with too little advance discussion and that not enough difference was expressed. “Where is the passion?” asked Cronin, adding, “Unless we really debate the issues, we won’t understand where we agree or disagree.” Then participants went outside for a coffee break, where they spontaneously divided into small groups on the lawn and engaged in spirited discussions on the same issues. What appeared to be happening was that the party had succeeded in sparking debate but not yet learned how best to institutionalize the process.

The trade unions, too, face new challenges, against a backdrop of strong pressure from capital and from the state to forego actions that disrupt production in order, so goes the neoliberal argument, to strengthen South Africa’s ability to compete in the global market. In this context,

NUMSA's 1995 campaign the first in two years, complete with T-shirts, buttons and banners may be a model of how the unions can reactivate the locals and draw the membership into direct participation again.

Behind the slogan "Close the Apartheid Wage Gap," the main objective is not to raise wages, apart from cost of living, but to shrink the number of grades for workers in the metal and auto industries from fourteen to five and to reduce the grade differentials to no more than ten percent in an effort to address worker inequality. This will be linked to a drive to gain access to more skills for those in the lower grades. In March, the major COSATU affiliates also met to coordinate wage demands, positioning them to act in concert in the event they determine strike action is necessary in the upcoming bargaining cycle.

The coming period will also provide the country's progressive NGOs with a critically important capacity building challenge with regard to the popular movement, at a time when the government will be trying to coopt the NGOs into simple delivery channels and foreign funders will seek to build them into interlocutors with the grassroots, substituting, if not overtly undermining, a reemergent militant popular movement.

Inevitably, this will lead to confrontations with the new government. Will the left, and in particular the SACP, play a leadership role in this, or will it take a low profile in an attempt to protect its position in the liberation movement and in the state? This is another of the key places where we will test the mettle of the left, but the evidence is not likely to be sufficient to draw conclusions for several years.

ATC 58, September-October 1995

Share this:

 Twitter < <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc058/p2573/?share=twitter&nb=1> >

 Facebook < <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc058/p2573/?share=facebook&nb=1> >

 WhatsApp < <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc058/p2573/?share=jetpack-whatsapp&nb=1> >

 Email < <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc058/p2573/?share=email&nb=1> >

 Print < <https://againstthecurrent.org/atc058/p2573/#print> >