

Factional warfare grips Congress of South African Trade Unions

By Thabo Seseane Jr.
30 December 2013

The following article was submitted by a guest correspondent.

Having been routinely used as election fodder for the ruling African National Congress (ANC), South African workers now face the prospect of serving as cannon fodder for rival factions of the country's dominant trade union confederation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

In an unprecedented move, National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) General Secretary Irvin Jim declared at a special national congress on December 20 that his union would henceforth accept members other than metalworkers.

As Numsa is already Cosatu's biggest affiliate, this could clearly cannibalise other unions. By flouting Cosatu's "one union, one industry" dictum, Numsa effectively may end up as a mini-confederation under Cosatu. From the standpoint of a veteran union bureaucrat like Jim, this may have the attraction of limiting migration to newer and "radical" non-Cosatu formations, like the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu).

Whatever its intentions, the scheme has been hotly denounced by Cosatu brass. In the words of Cosatu President Sidumo Dlamini, any union tampering with the confederation's principles turned itself into a general union that displaced Cosatu, "causing workers to fight and kill each other."

Undaunted, Jim announced that Numsa would, for the first time in living memory, not support the ANC in the upcoming general election. Nor, he added, would his union keep paying dues to Cosatu or the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP).

He singled out Cosatu's first central executive committee (CEC) meeting in the New Year, scheduled for February 2014, as the object of a mooted Numsa

march on Cosatu House in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. In response, National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) General Secretary Fikile Majola observed that Nehawu and other affiliates would have no choice but to defend their confederation.

In fact, there is nothing in Cosatu that any group of workers need to risk their necks defending against other workers. The showdown between different elements in Cosatu is bound up with factionalism among the elite.

With the December 2007 replacement of Thabo Mbeki by Jacob Zuma as ANC president, the ringleaders of these blocs mistakenly thought they had arrived at a durable dispensation. In that brave new world, Cosatu and the SACP were to have seen the reversal of their isolation from the centres of power. Indeed, one reward for their electioneering on behalf of Zuma was to have been a policy-making role as full, not junior partners of the ANC.

Alas! As soon as Zuma was ensconced as national president, he scrambled to prove his servility to big capital at the expense of his left-talking friends. He retained Mbeki's finance minister, Trevor Manuel, albeit in the presidency's new national planning portfolio. Into Manuel's old post went Pravin Gordhan, a technocrat who had lately covered himself in laurels by squeezing quantifiable efficiencies from the South African Revenue Service, on top of the bonanza of the pre-credit crisis boom. The rest of the cabinet was given over mostly to ciphers who had eased Zuma's way to power.

When the cold light of day broke over the Tripartite Alliance in the Zuma administration, the Stalinists were the more sanguine over their ongoing marginalisation from policymaking. SACP head Blade Nzimande took the post of higher-education minister and used it to

attack Zuma's enemies, real and perceived, including Cosatu General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi until the latter's suspension in the summer.

The credit implosion deepened as the Zuma administration wore on. The rate of foreign investment slowed. Zuma's campaign promise to create five million jobs was exposed as empty. Retrenchments, vying with stagnant employment growth and rampant casualisation now hold sway.

Then Trevor Manuel, of all people, produced the National Development Plan (NDP). To the union bureaucrats, it looked suspiciously like Mbeki's Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) strategy that replaced the Mandela Reconstruction and Development Programme. Manuel had foisted Gear on the Tripartite Alliance, declaring it non-negotiable, in what Cosatu and the SACP have ever since bitterly dubbed "the 1996 Class Project". With the NDP now formally adopted, the minister was again peddling nakedly neoliberal dogma.

Through Vavi, Cosatu opposed the NDP. This was crucial at a time of declining membership and of the emergence of independent unions like Amcu.

Especially in the aftermath of the police massacre of 34 striking miners at Marikana August 16, 2012, with the active collusion of the National Union of Mineworkers, Vavi felt the working class heat from below more keenly than did his ANC and SACP compatriots.

Unfortunately for him, even the limited critique which he offered of the NDP was too much for Zuma's clique to stomach. After Vavi fell for the charms of a junior Cosatu employee, the media first broke news of the indiscretion around July.

Having pressed rape charges against Vavi, the woman then withdrew them without explanation. Throughout, Vavi insisted their intimacy was consensual, and apologised for the extramarital tryst. But the pro-Zuma Cosatu faction under Dlamini now had all the ammunition they needed.

At a marathon CEC meeting in August, Cosatu resolved to subject Vavi to a formal disciplinary process and suspended him for bringing the organisation into disrepute.

It is in this tawdry light that Numsa's pending pro-Vavi legal challenge against Cosatu needs to be seen.

Workers should similarly look askance on Jim's demand that Cosatu formally break with the ANC. Even his calls for Zuma's immediate resignation are informed not by principle but self-interest. This is a wealthy union bureaucrat whose caste would gladly force the working class to pay with its own blood if necessary, just so the incoming gang can replace the old bosses with more of the same.

No one in the Tripartite Alliance has any essential objection to continued worker exploitation under the existing property relations. Workers will gain nothing from the defeat of Dlamini and the reinstatement of Vavi.

While speaking, thanks to his suspension, in a "personal" capacity at the Numsa KwaZulu-Natal congress in November, Vavi identified the factional divisions that have emerged as "symptoms of deep underlying class contradictions in the liberation movement itself and its formations including Cosatu".

At the confederation's 11th national congress in October 2012, he noted that "a multiple crisis is emerging in society, which, if not addressed, has the potential to result in an organisational implosion, and social explosion."

However, the role of Vavi and the likes of Jim in such an explosion would be to channel workers' anger into sterile avenues. As union bureaucrats they already have a long record of pushing reformist illusions in the bourgeois nationalist ANC. In the midst of all the manoeuvring for the 2014 general elections, no Cosatu faction represents a progressive way out of the persistent crisis, for which global and South African capitalism is demanding payment through the intensified agony of the working class.

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