

# The roots of South Africa's Workers and Socialist Party and its political role

By Thabo Seseane Jr.  
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In the lead-up to South Africa's 2014 general election, the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP), a pseudo-leftist group with links to the Committee for a Workers' International (CWI), has emerged. It claims to point the way towards a socialist reconstruction of society, and that it alone represents the interests of the proletariat.

WASP is nothing of the kind. The party is instead related through its core elements to the bourgeois nationalist African National Congress (ANC).

Regarding the ANC splinter group that later gave birth to WASP, Steven Friedman, in a piece for the *Journal of Asian and African Studies* reproduced at abahlali.org, states, "At the beginning of the 1980s, a group of left intellectuals and activists sought to press the then-exiled ANC...to adopt a change of strategy which would give priority to the organized collective action of workers and the poor: they were expelled and their proposed remedies ignored."

At this time, the ANC was banned in South Africa, its leadership imprisoned on Robben Island or living abroad. Under the influence of its Stalinist ally, the South African Communist Party (SACP), the ANC adopted a policy of "armed struggle" in the early 1960s. This targeted infrastructure in infrequent bombings carried out by small cells, with no orientation to the working class.

In the absence of an ANC presence on the ground, it had fallen to workers to give expression to anti-apartheid resistance in the Durban mass strikes of 1973 that forced concessions from the bourgeoisie. Three years later, the students of Soweto took the lead in an insurrection against the apartheid state, brought on by its attempted imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools. To some of its strategists, the ANC's alienation from the masses would have been discomfiting. These are the layers who looked to workers' organisations as a legitimising link to the broader population for the ANC's pro-capitalist and Stalinist leadership. The group expelled from the ANC, who then organised themselves into the Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT) of the ANC, failed to inspire a following in the rank and file after their initial failure to win any leadership support for their positions.

Yet, the cohorts of the MWT have continued all the way to the present to promote illusions in the ability of radical cliques to enter and then pressure mass movements, of an essentially bourgeois character, in a leftward direction. This is the inspiration behind WASP's recent call for the influential National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) to contest the election under the WASP banner. The opportunity arose after NUMSA broke with tradition by withdrawing its backing for the ANC in the upcoming ballot (see "Campaigning underway in South African elections").

Paula Ensor, Dave Hemson, Martin Legassick and Mark Heywood, the founders of the MWT, are still referred to as the "Gang of Four". The intervention that was to drive Legassick and his colleagues out of the ANC appeared in 1979 and was entitled "The Workers' Movement, SACTU and the ANC—A Struggle for Marxist Policies". It sought to

persuade the ANC and SACTU to take up the perspective of socialist revolution, while criticising the focus on armed struggle and uMkhonto weSizwe. Is this correct?.

It was the primary conceit of the MWT that it is possible to arrive at the socialist reorganisation of society without first building a mass revolutionary party, because any mass base will do.

Glossing over or ignoring the difficult preliminary work of educating the working class on its historic tasks is often a sign of the middle-class adventurism that has passed for Marxist theory in our time. That Legassick and company should so favour putting leftist pressure on existing mass organisations was bound up with their glorification of the possibilities of entryism.

Entryism is a purely tactical manoeuvre involving the entry of a Trotskyist bloc into a larger organisation with the aim of exposing the existing leadership of the working class and recruiting among the left wing and especially the youth section of the larger body—after which there must be preparation for a decisive split.

The move was used to great effect in France and the United States in the mid-1930s. After the fall of the Daladier government, the Socialist Party (SFIO) and the French Communist Party formed a "United Front" to forestall a fascist takeover as had happened in Germany. Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Lenin of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, saw a great opportunity to expand the ranks of the Trotskyist movement. He accordingly convinced the Communist League, the French section of the International Left Opposition, to enter the SFIO in June 1934. The Trotskyists then split from the United Front over plans to expand it into a Popular Front that would have included non-proletarian elements.

In the US, the Trotskyist entry into the Socialist Party at the end of 1935 had international ramifications, facilitating the organisation of the Dewey Commission, which cleared Trotsky of the trumped-up charges against him and in the process discredited the Moscow Trials set up by the Stalinist bureaucracy to wipe out the most educated and principled cadre of the Bolshevik Party.

In *The Heritage We Defend*, David North writes, "The precondition for the application of the entry tactic is always the political firmness of the Trotskyist cadre and its capacity to resist the class pressures which are intensified when working within a hostile milieu."

This is borne out in the negative by the example of Ted Grant, whose long career led from the Workers' International League (WIL), through the International Socialist League (ISL) and into the Militant Tendency, forerunner of the CWI. Alone among the Trotskyist groups, Grant's WIL refused to sign onto the Fourth International (FI) in 1938 based upon tactical considerations relating to work in the UK.

When the FI split into the orthodox Trotskyist International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the Pabloite revisionist International Secretariat (IS), Grant found a home in the IS. He did so based upon a shared perspective that the road to socialism proceeded not through the building of the Fourth International, but through efforts to

encourage the existing Stalinist, social democratic and bourgeois nationalist movements to move to the left.

Grant and Pablo held that the Stalinist parties in Eastern Europe could be pressured into “self-reform”. Following this, and after a prolonged period of wars against imperialism, they would establish workers’ states through force without the need for the conscious participation of the working class in the process.

To the notions of Pabloite groups on the necessity of abjectly pressuring Stalinists into self-correcting, we may counterpose Trotsky’s remarks: “It is the duty of revolutionary socialists to mercilessly expose the leadership of these organisations as agents of the ruling class in the ranks of the workers and to win over the broad mass of the workers from the leadership of these organisations to the party of the Fourth International.”

Grant chose instead to enter into alliances with such organisations. In his 1959 essay, “Problems of Entrism”, he declared, “[T]he conditions for entry, as Trotsky outlined them, are still not present.” Then he gainsaid himself: “The conditions for independent work are not favourable either.”

This led to an extended period in which the Militant Tendency transformed the tactic of entryism into dogma, vainly living in the Labour Party against the day it would peacefully institute socialism by parliamentary majority.

Grant and his followers stated with Pablo that in the post-World War II situation, Trotsky’s prognosis was incorrect. Not only had he underestimated the staying power of capital, he had also overstated the ability of the working class to make a socialist revolution.

In this situation, according to Grant, the mass workers’ movement under the social democrats and Stalinists would be the way to socialism. Grant’s belief in the semi-permanent entry of a mass workers’ party, in his case Labour, was therefore absolute. For him, agitating for the adoption of socialist policies had the power to bring about the socialist reorganisation of Britain, so long as he had the backing of the unions.

Not only was this view pessimistic, it was also liquidationist. Behind their revolutionary rhetoric, Grant, Pablo and their ilk worked for the consolidation of a programme of counterrevolution.

In the mid-1970s, the Militant Tendency, led by Grant and present CWI head Peter Taaffe, enjoyed a period of rapid growth. This was due to its having gained control of the Labour Party Young Socialists. By the mid-1980s, Militant was being billed as the world’s largest Trotskyist movement. But the rise of Thatcherism and the rightward drift of intellectual opinion took their toll. A 1982 commission of the Labour Party found the group in contravention of the Labour constitution and therefore ineligible for affiliation to the party.

The five members of the editorial board of the *Militant* newspaper were expelled from Labour in 1983. Then, a series of actions by Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock led to the expulsion of other prominent members and the eventual loss of Militant’s two Labour MPs. Militant itself expelled Grant in 1991 after a majority voted to finally abandon its entryism policy.

There is more in common between the Militant Tendency and the MWT than just bourgeois reformism in Marxist garb. They are also linked through a South African union organiser and anti-apartheid activist, Nimrod Sejake, who moved in Militant as well as MWT circles while in exile.

Sejake (1920-2004), having been arrested with the other defendants, slipped out of the country during the Treason Trial, which ran until 1961 and saw 156 activists including Nelson Mandela arrested and tried for treason against the apartheid state. Sejake ended up in exile in the Soviet Union.

Such political education as he got from the apparatchiks of the corrupt Kremlin bureaucracy did not challenge the policy of subordinating the working class to the bourgeois programme advanced by the ANC for a capitalist democracy in South Africa. Even before his exile, he had been

critical of the ANC leadership’s inclination to call off strikes or channel them in harmless directions. Sejake’s belief in pressure groups as a means of effecting a revolutionary orientation in mass movements was at odds with the ANC leadership, which under cover of the radical phrasing of its 1955 Freedom Charter is to this day committed to enforcing bourgeois imperatives against workers.

In the fullness of time, the ANC abandoned its half-hearted objective of power through arms and was unbanned. It showed the extent of its desire for the preservation of the bourgeois order through its crucial participation in the multiparty talks that led to the 1994 Government of National Unity (GNU). Its GNU partners included members of the last apartheid government of F W de Klerk, and the Inkatha Freedom Party, another party of the right.

Things would have been no different had Sejake and the MWT succeeded in their entryist schemes. The proof is in the experience of Grant and Militant in the Labour Party (which like the ANC was invested with all the hopes of the working class), as well as in Sejake’s further disputes with the ANC executive. Sejake returned to Africa to take up the post of political commissar at the ANC training camp at Morogoro, Tanzania. In an interview republished on redlug.com, we read, “After a time in Tanzania the ANC leadership told me that I should no longer teach Marxism. [T]he person who initiated this was...Moses Kotane, then the general secretary of the South African Communist Party. It astonished me when he said we must teach instead the ‘African image’. This is ludicrous.”

Sejake also clashed with the ANC leadership in exile because of its unwillingness to send trained organisers back to South Africa to prepare for revolution through more militant trade unionism. The leaders preferred Guevarist armed struggle, orienting fighters to the peasantry while making appeals to the United Nations. After they fired Sejake, President Julius Nyerere expelled him from the country.

Sejake complained, “The major problem was that we, the workers, who supported and built the ANC, did not control it. Even SACTU was under the control of middle-class ANC leaders....” What way out did he propose? “I agree fully with [the MWT publication] *Inqaba* when it says that the trade unions should join and play their part in the [United Democratic Front], transform the UDF into a mass working-class movement....” [Ibid.]

According to Wikipedia, the UDF was a “non-racial coalition of about 400 civic, students’, workers’ and other organisations...formed in 1983, initially to fight the Tricameral Parliament [that] granted meaningless representation to Indians and [people of mixed race] and left the black majority in the same position.” In fact, the UDF was one belated response of the banned ANC to its lack of affiliation to a mass movement inside South Africa.

Again, we must contrast Sejake’s idea of entering such a broad front organisation with the orthodox Trotskyist line. James P. Cannon, past leader of the ICFI, held that Trotskyist strategy equated to the building of independent revolutionary socialist parties by all tactical means. This independence refers to a membership with an exclusively proletarian orientation and no foreign class influence. The national programme of such a party would spring from and be subordinate to an ongoing assessment of the international situation.

The failure of the social democratic parties and liberation movements to mount a challenge to capitalism throughout the twentieth century arose from their very dependence on the bourgeois order. Hand in hand with such subservience went the treachery of the Stalinist bureaucracy. This abetted the long post-World War II stabilisation of capitalism and prepared the collapse of the autarkic Soviet economy by 1991 and the restoration of capitalism in the USSR.

Like Sejake, WASP is opposed to any notion of an independent revolutionary movement of the working class. Instead, it offers itself as a

“left” pressure group that would be no more effective than was Militant. It would only provide a left cover and issue various feeble protests when called for, while the ANC presides over the systematic impoverishment of the bulk of South Africans in support of a super-rich minority. The syndicalist approach of WASP and similar formations is to gather and control all progressive tendencies under one wing of the bureaucracy, the better to preserve capitalism by encouraging illusions in its improvability.

For all his outrage at the ANC’s African nationalism, the guerillarism, the damping of worker and youth militancy, Sejake and his MWT friends only led workers to the same dead end by another route. That is the only conclusion to be drawn from an assessment of some of the activities of the Gang of Four since their MWT days.

Mark Heywood, executive director of non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sector27, is today one of the most prominent of the ex-MWT members. He spoke in glowing terms in a December interview with the *Daily Maverick* about the activism of one of his circle, Zackie Achmat, a 2009 recipient of a grant from the Soros Open Society Foundation and co-founder with Heywood of the pressure group Treatment Action Campaign (TAC): “In 2003 civil society broke government intransigence and changed policy thereby ending [HIV/AIDS] denialism.... Working in civil society can be depressing and challenging but change is possible and you have to stick with it.”

Heywood further punts reformism: “[M]isbehaviour of private power should be addressed by [the] state. Not arbitrarily, but by making sure excessive prices don’t prevent access to education, health or food—all of which are constitutional rights.”

Thus, the capitalist state is held up as a check on the actions of individual capitalists and corporations, but only when their actions are deemed “excessive.”

The significance of the raft of NGOs founded by ex-MWT members is this: they give breathing space to the bourgeoisie. They allow sections of the public to blow off steam, giving voice to their frustrations in a way that does not fundamentally threaten the economic, political and social underpinnings of inequality.

NGOs and “social movements” also serve another pernicious purpose. They divide working-class power according to lifestyle issues and identity politics. No doubt the work of the TAC is vital, but it is a work best carried out under the banner of the complete socialist reorganisation of society, not the upper-middle-class focus on piecemeal projects. An overarching class-based approach would at the same time solve questions of gender inequality, racial discrimination, AIDS orphans, environmental sustainability, legal access, land reform, etc.

In the course of the election, more working class voters may well decide that all these issues are connected, that they could be addressed through one organisation in spite of the profusion of special-interest groups on offer from the likes of Heywood.

There may even be a growing orientation towards a political party with a mass base. Naturally, the ex-MWT members hope that that party will be their own WASP.

One of the founders of the WASP is the MWT successor, the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM). The DSM bills itself as a Trotskyist organisation affiliated to the CWI. Under DSM tutelage, WASP has been adept at public relations stunts such as that through which it linked itself to mass outrage over the Marikana killings of August 2012.

The WASP in spite of its radical rhetoric may be unable to attract enough voter interest on its own. This is why it approached NUMSA with the offer of linking forces. If the NUMSA bureaucracy agrees, there would be political dividends flowing in the form of the left verbiage provided by WASP and the DSM and possibly more pecuniary rewards from such friends of the ex-MWT group as the Ford, Rockefeller and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations.

Should WASP prove to be a non-starter, the likes of Heywood have options that are even more ominous for workers. In the *Daily Maverick* piece, he says, “[I]nstead of calling [the Economic Freedom Fighters] names, we need to engage with it on its own terms.”

The EFF are led by the corrupt bourgeois populist and expelled ANC Youth League President Julius Malema. The “we” to whom Heywood refers above are clearly the wealthy middle-class elements like him, who are always ready to strike a bargain with reaction while occasionally mouthing the leftist slogans of their youth.

In answer, workers, intellectuals, youth and the unemployed need to show that revolutionary Marxism is not a dead letter but a living force. They must build the South African section of the International Committee of the Fourth International as the necessary precondition for taking power and democratically reorganising society on a socialist basis.

To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>