

Defend, advance and consolidate the alliance

The recent public acrimony in the tripartite alliance is a result of the ongoing battle around a macroeconomic strategy for the country. Cosatu's privatisation strike, supported by the South African Communist Party (SACP) must therefore, be seen as the latest battle in an ongoing and protracted struggle over the issue of the growth, employment and redistribution strategy (Gear).

However, a key feature of the alliance, especially since the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the SACP, has been vigorous debate that reaches a climax just before the various national congresses of the alliance partners. In the run up to congresses (as in the case of the upcoming ANC national congress), the functioning of the alliance usually comes under close scrutiny. This, rather than being a weakness, has been the key pillar of strength of the alliance.

Challenges for the alliance

During an address by ANC national executive committee (NEC) member Joel Nethitenzhe to Cosatu's central executive committee (CEC) on 23 February 2000 he highlighted a number of factors leading to tension in the alliance. These related to the fact that the ANC has a responsibility not only to the employed but unemployed workers. The interest of the employed must therefore, be navigated 'creatively' so that it does not exclude the unemployed. Other tensions related to how detours or

There has been a flurry of articles in the various media on whether the alliance should end or not. Shiraz Ebrahim evaluates these and argues that the alliance will remain at the centre of South Africa's political reality, at least for the foreseeable future.

compromises were understood; the failure to communicate effectively and Cosatu's articulation of its support for socialism. Cosatu's attitude in this regard could be interpreted as implying that the ANC government is not socialist, and therefore the enemy.

These issues underscore the ANC's awkwardness with Cosatu's position on Gear and state asset restructuring. The ANC views Cosatu's position as one of narrow self interest where it seeks to fight for interest of its own members at the expense of the broader working class. In addition, it views certain tendencies in Cosatu as 'adventurist' that could lead to the common ruin of the country.

On the other hand, Adam Habib and Rupert Taylor (1999), Ebrahim Harvey (2001) have argued consistently for the break of the alliance. They argue that the

tripartite alliance 'was not an effective mechanism to enable Cosatu to influence ANC and government policies'. (Habib and Taylor 1999:113) They argue that the adoption of Gear reflects Cosatu's inability to influence ANC policy. As a consequence, Cosatu should combine forces with other groupings in civil society and form a new labour-based party in opposition to the ANC. However Habib, Taylor and Harvey discard as almost non-events the influence Cosatu has had over determining an industrial relations system that favours and protects workers.

Aside from influencing labour market policy, Cosatu provided input to policies on public health in particular primary health care, land, abortion and many more. The deliberate downplaying of these issues by the writers indicates their inability to understand the relationship between the three alliance partners and their relation to government.

Tactical compromise or paradigm shift

The adoption of Gear, these writers argue, reflects that the ANC is on a road of no return down the neoliberal path. The recent issue of privatisation/restructuring would probably be proof to them of this view. Harvey argues this point in a recent *Labour Bulletin* 25 (5) article. He argues that: 'What determines the policies of the ANC is not information from thorough research on the effects of privatisation worldwide but the demands of the representatives of global capitalism.' Without asking what the alternatives are or the implications, Harvey suggests that we should ignore the dominant social forces in the world today. Restructuring/privatisation might have certain negative consequences for our country and there might be other alternatives. However, to use this as an argument that the ANC is pursuing a neoliberal agenda is ludicrous.

The ANC and government seem to argue that the international climate does not provide many options in relation to policy matters. Inherent in this argument is the concept of a tactical or even a strategic compromise to safeguard our fledgling democracy. Similarly, it argues that Gear was such a compromise that had to be made in order to stabilise the economy and avoid a meltdown.

Though these views could be contested, the question the left must ask is: How do we ensure that these 'tactical compromises' do not become paradigm shifts? The view of Harvey and others suggests that the battle has already been lost. This view is indicative of the simplistic understanding of the ANC and the nature of the alliance.

A labour-based mass party: An infantile wish

The arguments by left and right commentators are based on the view that the consolidation of democracy in South Africa is dependent on a strong opposition. The ANC is seen as a dominant party and that such dominance could undermine the consolidation of democracy as a result of arrogance and total disregard for the constitution. In addition, it is argued that the opposition to the right of the ANC is weak and is no challenge for the organisation. Therefore, Cosatu is the only credible alternative.

These arguments tend to define democracy in extremely narrow terms. Democracy and its consolidation are based on more than simply an opposition. O'Donnell and Schmitter argue that a principle of democratic consolidation implies that a party that wins a majority vote in an election will not use its power to permanently exclude others. The manner in which the ANC has used its two-thirds majority is instructive on this point.

Those who propose that Cosatu should form a broad labour party seem to ignore the difficulties of contesting the ANC in an election. Various academics point to the fact that even the 'forces to the right of the ANC', who are powerful because of their control over key elements in the economy, find it difficult to compete with the ANC. How much more so would the left. Ultimately, such an attempt would only lead to the marginalisation of the left in general and Cosatu in particular.

The ANC is not the party of world capitalists. On the contrary, it seeks to grapple with the issues of the day in a real way instead of holding on to some historical dogma. Some might not always agree with the tactical and strategic positions and posturing of the government or the ANC. However, this in no way should lead to a conclusion that the organisation has sold out its revolutionary character in favour of a neoliberal agenda.

Southall argues for a more corporatist type of engagement between Cosatu and the ANC. He argues that the tripartite alliance represents a 'strategic compromise' between competing tendencies within the liberation camp (2001:35).

Cosatu's former general secretary Sam Shilowa, in *Labour Bulletin* 21 (2), disagrees and argues that the alliance is based on a transformative platform that aims to democratise the country. In this regard it is not formed on the basis of compromise but rather on the basis of commonality. This constitutes a fundamental difference to a compromise-based alliance, which is as a result of some form of stalemate. In such an alliance parties come together and negotiate for their particular interest. On the other hand, in an alliance based on shared values, ideals, and vision, the parties voluntarily and deliberately choose to

cooperate with each other.

Corporatist arrangements in a society the size of ours in the present international context might be appropriate especially for labour, but such arrangements should be based on securing the national interest of the country.

Restructuring/privatisation

One of the key challenges confronting the alliance at this stage is how to manage the differences around the restructuring of state assets. Aside from differences over definitions, is the claim by Cosatu that the ANC in its election manifesto as well as its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) document made no reference to privatisation. (Makgetla 2001:17)

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Inherent in this assertion by Makgetla is an accusation that the ANC has sold out to private capital. If the definition of privatisation as implied by Makgetla and Cosatu is correct; one might lean towards such an accusation. However the ANC policy documents 'Ready to Govern', 'The RDP', and the 'Mafikeng Conference Resolution' does indeed give government the option to decide, on the balance of evidence, on the role of the state and private capital in the economy. The 50th conference resolution states: 'The restructuring of state assets is an integral part of the transformation of the economy' (online). As a matter of fact the manifesto argues that the public sector is the preferred deliverer of services, but in

no way suggests that it is and will be the only deliverer of services.

In or out? – That is not the question

The alliance continues to be a very significant feature of the political reality despite many wish-fulfilling predictions about its 'imminent demise'. Harvey argues in the *Labour Bulletin* 25 (5) that Cosatu should break from the ANC-led tripartite alliance and form an independent workers' party. This argument is not new and can be traced back to the mid-1980s during the height of the workerist-populist debate. Similar arguments are now emerging from some of the present day ultra-leftists. Harvey argues that the differences over privatisation are so sharp that 'the end of the Cosatu-ANC alliance is imminent'.

Harvey says Cosatu can only expect to gain insignificant 'concessions' from the ANC on privatisation as it is tied to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Harvey seems to ignore one fundamental aspect of the tripartite alliance – the alliance partners benefit to a greater or lesser degree by their participation in the alliance.

The concept of such an alliance is based on the principle that the breaking up of the alliance can and will only lead to the collective weakening of each individual component. Harvey thus fails to take note of the fact that Cosatu benefits from the alliance as it assists in legitimising the federation as a revolutionary trade union movement. The ANC and SACP on the other hand benefit from Cosatu in that it provides them with an anchor in the base of the organised working class.

In the aftermath of the privatisation strike, each component has continued to insist on their commitment to the alliance. All three have located this alliance in the context of a protracted and ongoing

struggle for national democratic transformation. Perhaps, most significantly has been an important shift in attitude within Cosatu, where the continuation of the alliance has always been the subject of some debate. Over the years, worker delegates have argued that the debate is not about whether we have an alliance, but how that alliance should be built and how it should function.

The ANC too in its recent 'briefing notes' document to the NEC called for the alliance to be built. Cosatu at a recent political school for its CEC resolved that: 'The alliance represent an historic progressive block bringing together the national liberation movement which leads the NDR – the ANC, the vanguard party of the working class, the SACP and the revolutionary trade union – Cosatu. We recommit ourselves to building the political centre that drives the transformation project in South Africa.' The SACP on the other hand 'affirms the importance of our alliance' in a recent Politburo discussion document. These comments by the alliance partners imply not only the continuation of the alliance but the *need* for it to continue.

There are arguments for the alliance to take a new form. Such form should not, however, undermine the content of the alliance. It must be noted that some of the elements that lead to rising tensions are more often than not from administrative blunders in convening alliance meetings and/or internal platforms which could lead to constructive debate. Aside from this, the concept of consultation needs to be understood by all. What constitutes consultation? What issues should form the basis of consultation? How do we resolve differences without undermining the organisational integrity of the three organisations?

These are some of the issues, relating to the operational functioning of the alliance

that need to be sorted out. Central to this is not just the agreement on a wayforward but it's implementation. This is one element that is missing every time.

As the leader in the alliance, the ANC has a responsibility to provide a leadership role, which will unite rather than divide members. Such leadership must not be exercised as divine intervention but as part of a collective that seeks to honestly find solutions. The leadership role of the ANC is not questioned, but this does not mean that the other parties are junior or subservient to the ANC. Its decisions, as leader in the alliance, are not automatically binding on the other two components. Nor should it be the case that certain policies are not open for discussion.

Conclusion

The debate unleashed by the anti-privatisation strike is not necessarily a bad thing. It is clear that there are very serious differences between the alliance partners. Whilst the debate is vigorous, and it should be, it does not reflect a desire on behalf of the parties to split.

At the heart of the debate is the issue of strategies and tactics in pursuance of a common objective. The tripartite alliance must concede that the terrain on which the alliance operates is not the same as during the pre-1994 period. The character of all three elements of the alliance has also changed and will continue to change. It is during this period that political leadership, devoid of personal preferences, must triumph. This is especially so in the face of opportunistic attempts by forces on the left and right of the alliance to break it up.

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