

South Africa at 20: The re-awakening of “the left” in post-apartheid South Africa?

As the African National Congress (ANC) pursues a “talk left, walk right strategy”, Stephen Hurt of Oxford Brookes University analyses what “the left” needs to do to become a potent force in South Africa’s politics once again.

In the next few months the media coverage of South Africa will inevitably focus on the forthcoming national and provincial elections in May, however more interesting developments have taken place in recent months that may be of greater significance for the medium-term. For most of the post-apartheid era “the left” within South Africa has been predominantly associated with the tripartite alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). However, increasing divisions within Cosatu led to its largest affiliate – the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) – removing its electoral support for the ANC in December 2013 and arguing for Cosatu to leave the alliance. Then, earlier this month, **NUMSA announced formal plans** to develop a new, leftist political movement in South Africa, tentatively entitled the “United Front and Movement for Socialism”.



Are we entering a transformational period of the traditional “left” in South African politics?

So, what are the prospects for a re-awakening of “the left” in South Africa? Will NUMSA be able to build effective links with the array of “new social movements” that have emerged during the last decade?

What unites the range of self-identified leftist forces within South Africa is their broad agreement on what constitutes the development challenges for contemporary South Africa: unemployment, rising inequality and poverty. Even Jacob Zuma, rhetorically at least, shares this view; suggesting in his **2012 state of the nation address** that “the triple challenge of unemployment, poverty and inequality persists, despite the progress made”. Since 1994, government policy has followed a broadly neoliberal direction and the durability of these challenges is a direct consequence of following economic orthodoxy. As a result, South Africa needs an effective and transformative leftist formation.

For much of the last twenty years many on the left within South Africa had hoped that the tripartite alliance would allow its junior partners (SACP and Cosatu) to capture the heart of the ANC. This, it was argued, would ensure that the structural reforms needed to address the ongoing legacies of the apartheid era could be achieved. In particular, this was the reasoning behind their support for Jacob Zuma in his successful campaign to oust Thabo Mbeki as ANC President at Polokwane in 2007. However, the ANC, has adopted a strategy of “talk left, walk right” during its time in

government and the Zuma Presidency has continued in this vein, despite the presence of a number of key SACP members in the government.

Cosatu has been the most consistently critical member of the alliance during the period of democratic rule. However, it has evolved from an organisation that sought links with community groups during the liberation struggle, to one that has focused on collective bargaining within the economic parameters set by the ANC government. As such, it has deliberately distanced itself from the rise in popular struggles that have become the inevitable outcome of the post-apartheid denouement. So the issue is not simply whether Cosatu (or some of its affiliates) leaves the alliance or not. An effective leftist formation needs to be rooted to the interests of precarious workers and the underemployed and not just the rank-and-file membership of the trade unions.

During the late 1990s, we saw the emergence of a number of “new social movements” that were active in both underlining the failures of the ANC government and mobilising the poor and the marginalised. We have also witnessed the rise of so-called “service delivery protests” that have become both more violent and frequent under Zuma. Together, they highlight the re-emergence of significant resistance, but the problem is that they remain localised and uncoordinated. It would be a mistake to assume that they will automatically result in a truly progressive leftist political formation. The populist appeal of Julius Malema and his new political party – the Economic Freedom Fighters – reflects the contingency of the current situation.

So, the task for the left in South Africa is not to continue trying to convince the ANC to abandon its commitment to a neoliberal development strategy. It must be to seek to overcome the divisions that have historically defined the left in the past. Prior to the more recent moves by NUMSA, a group known as the Democratic Left Front (DLF) was launched in January 2011, with the explicit aim of uniting the left outside of the alliance. The DLF is still rather embryonic and faces the significant task of connecting with the masses. NUMSA may offer leadership in this regard, given its size and stature, and the DLF have been supportive of its recent decisions. Nevertheless, despite some of the **recent media pronouncements** about the very real prospect of a workers’ party, a more detailed understanding of the state of the left in South Africa demonstrates that a number of important obstacles remain.

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