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South Africa’s Divided Working-Class Movements

MARCEL PARET

Labor Shifts

Eighth in a series

Working-class movements across the globe, and trade unions in particular, confront two crises. One is a crisis of declining political power. For much of the twentieth century, dominant political approaches prioritized full employment, social welfare, and the voice of organized labor. Even in South Africa, where brutal racial exclusion denied many of these benefits to the black majority, the apartheid system secured industrial protections and welfare provisions for white workers. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, this pro-worker politics was largely abandoned. Not only did capitalism emerge uncontested after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the priorities of capital—mobility, flexibility, efficiency, privatization, deregulation—now set the terms of engagement. In this environment, working class voices and priorities carry limited political weight.

The flip side of this so-called neoliberal shift is labor’s crisis of weakening structural power. In *Forces of Labor*, her influential historical study of worker movements, the sociologist Beverly Silver distinguishes between two forms of structural power: workplace bargaining power, which derives from workers’ capacity to disrupt production, and marketplace bargaining power, which derives from a tight supply of labor. Workers have been losing ground on both fronts. The growing varieties of precarious work, from temporary jobs to unpaid internships to outsourced functions, are quickly eroding workplace bargaining power. Perhaps even more significant are the large labor surpluses manifested in widespread unemployment, eating away at marketplace bargaining power. The latter problem is especially acute in the impoverished countries of the global South.

As South Africa moves into the third decade of post-apartheid democracy, the key result of these twin crises is working-class fragmentation. I use the term “working class” here broadly to refer to all those who lack capital and therefore depend on participation in the labor market for their survival. This includes unionized workers with stable jobs, others employed in various forms of precarious and informal work, and the unemployed. In South Africa today, working-class movements are divided over how to respond to the crisis of declining political power, and they are further split by their varied positions within the realm of production and employment.

STRUGGLE AND SOLIDARITY

It is impossible to understand contemporary South African working-class movements outside of the still relatively recent history of the anti-apartheid struggle. During the 1970s and ’80s, South Africa experienced a growing wave of popular resistance. The goals of the movement included national liberation, racial equality, and democracy. With working classes playing a central role, activists also thrust class-related demands over wages and livelihoods to the forefront. The prevalence of solidarity across different groups of workers proved especially important.

One instance of solidarity was the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, bringing workers associated

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with different unions together in a single federation. Before the launch of COSATU a debate raged over the political character of the emergent black trade unions that had burst onto the scene during the 1970s. The "populists" prioritized cross-class alliances and opposition to apartheid, while the "workerists" stressed worker leadership and opposition to capital. COSATU brought these two traditions under a single umbrella. Notably, this new unity did not include the "black consciousness" unions, which emphasized anti-racism and black leadership. They would go on to form the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU).

A second form of solidarity featured the extension of trade-union activism beyond the workplace, bringing unionized workers together with student groups, women's groups, and the unemployed, among others. Trade unions were increasingly involved in broader struggles for democratization, and they also joined community-based campaigns on issues such as housing and rent, public services, and transportation costs. It was this outward-looking activism that made South Africa an iconic example of what became known as social movement unionism.

But tensions simmered beneath these two forms of solidarity. A point of heated debate between populists and workerists, for example, was whether and how unionized workers should engage in struggles outside the workplace. Populist unions, such as the South African Allied Workers Union, wanted to fuse together labor and community struggles. Workerist unions, such as the Metal and Allied Workers Union and other affiliates of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU), were more suspicious of what they regarded as the petty-bourgeois character of community struggles. While not necessarily opposed to supporting campaigns beyond the workplace, they emphasized the importance of maintaining working-class leadership. Accordingly, they focused on building strong, democratic, and worker-controlled forms of shop-floor organization.

Resistance to the apartheid state created a strong basis for working-class solidarity. Yet fundamental differences of this kind lay beneath the surface, and never disappeared entirely. Two decades into the democratic period, these tensions are now gaining prominence.

The Marikana massacre revealed a gap between the ANC government and the black working class.

JUNIOR PARTNER

From its inception, COSATU had close ties with the African National Congress (ANC), the national liberation movement that was founded in 1912 and pushed into exile after 1960. Just three months after its formation, in March 1986, COSATU sent a delegation to the ANC headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia. A joint statement following the meeting acknowledged that the ANC was "regarded by the majority of the people of South Africa as the overall leader and genuine representative." This was an early indicator that the compromise reached between the populist and workerist factions would lean more heavily toward the populist side.

In addition to the ANC, the apartheid state also banned the South African Communist Party (SACP). The ANC and SACP worked together closely while in exile, and at times they appeared to be indistinguishable. After the state lifted the bans on both organizations in 1990, COSATU joined them in a formal partnership that became known as the Tripartite Alliance (or, more simply, as the Alliance). At a COSATU national congress in 1993, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) proposed that the federation abandon the ANC and create a separate, worker-oriented political party. The proposal was rejected, and COSATU remained in the Alliance. The ANC rose to power the following year in the country's first democratic elections.

The new democratic dispensation brought important gains for workers. These included legislation, notably the Labor Relations Act (1995) and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (1997), that enhanced labor protections such as access to collective bargaining. The gains also included increased access to the levers of state power. The newly established National Economic Development and Labor Council provided a corporatist institutional space where representatives of the state, labor, and business could negotiate the formation of policy. Equally important was COSATU's ability to influence government policy through Alliance summits and informal channels.

But the democratic transition was not a straightforward victory for labor. Many critics argued that the ANC's macroeconomic policies, particularly the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution strategy adopted in 1996, followed a neoliberal path

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that favored business over labor. Tension began to mount in the early 2000s over issues such as the privatization of public services. Some within COSATU urged reconsideration of its participation in the Alliance. The ANC countered such tendencies by dismissing critical voices as "ultra-left" and at odds with the goals of national liberation.

For nearly two decades the relationship between COSATU and the ANC ebbed and flowed, yet with little substantive change. At times elements within COSATU grew more critical of the ruling party and the relationship became tense; in other moments they walked in lockstep. Despite these ups and downs, the formal partnership persisted. COSATU remained a junior partner to the dominant ANC in the Alliance.

A significant episode in their relations was the battle between President Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's successor, and Mbeki's deputy president, Jacob Zuma. Mbeki removed Zuma from office in 2005 over allegations of corruption and fraud, sparking a revolt within the Alliance. Zuma presented himself as a champion of workers and the poor, and COSATU lobbied hard on his behalf. In 2007, with a groundswell of popular support, Zuma secured the ANC presidency. He became president of South Africa in 2009, following the ANC's fourth consecutive electoral victory since the democratic transition in 1994. As of mid-April 2017, Zuma still holds both positions.

Unions have grown distant from community struggles in the post-apartheid period.

COSATU hoped Zuma would restore a working-class bias to the ANC. Instead, the Zuma administration became increasingly known for enabling factionalism, corruption, and crony capitalism. As the hopes for a Zuma-led working-class renewal quickly faded, a resurgence of political tensions loomed.

A MASSACRE'S AFTERSHOCKS

These tensions did not burst into the open until 2012, 18 years after the democratic transition. The massacre of 34 striking miners by police at Marikana, in North West province, proved to be a crucial catalyst. They worked at the Lonmin mine, where they had organized independently of recognized trade unions for a living wage of 12,500 rand per month (about $1,500 at the time). The massacre was reminiscent of apartheid-era repression, and revealed a gap between the ANC-led democratic state and the black working class.

Marikana sparked a dramatic reorganization of union representation within the so-called Platinum Belt, home to the three largest platinum mines in the world, run by Lonmin, Anglo American Platinum, and Impala Platinum. Before the massacre, the overwhelmingly dominant union in the sector was the COSATU-affiliated National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), founded three decades earlier. Some workers had become disillusioned with the NUM leadership, which they believed had grown too cozy with the mine owners and managers. This lack of trust explains, at least partially, why workers formed independent committees to lead their strike.

As the largest COSATU affiliate, boasting over 300,000 members before the massacre, NUM had clout within the Alliance. Some of its leaders held leadership positions within the ANC: Gwede Mantashe, the general secretary of the ANC under Zuma, was previously a general secretary of the NUM. As many workers saw it, the massacre revealed excessively close relationships among the NUM, COSATU, the ANC, the government, and the mining companies. The result was mass disaffection from the NUM.

The Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), a NACTU affiliate founded in 1990, was the main beneficiary of the reaction to the massacre. The NUM leadership had refused to visit the striking miners at the mountain where they were gathering, and where the police eventually attacked them. But AMCU President Joseph Mathunjwa had gone there and expressed sympathy for their cause. After the massacre, workers joined AMCU en masse, making it the majority union at Lonmin, Amplats, and Impala.

AMCU had remained relatively small throughout the 2000s, with a membership of less than 10,000 as of 2011. Due to the post-massacre membership shift, however, AMCU's ranks grew to nearly 90,000 by the end of 2013. Carrying forward the living-wage demand of the 2012 strike, AMCU led a five-month strike in 2014 by approximately 70,000 workers at the three large platinum mines. The strike led to significant wage increases.

The Marikana rupture resonated beyond the Platinum Belt. The most notable development was NUMSA's decision to withdraw its support from the ANC, putting into action the proposal that the massive metalworkers' union had tabled twenty years

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earlier on the eve of democracy. NUMSA also called for Zuma's resignation. Alleging that the Marikana massacre was "a well-planned and orchestrated strategy by the state to defend the profits of mining bosses," NUMSA declared that "after the mowing down of 34 miners in Marikana, it can't be 'business as usual' in South Africa."

The decision to no longer support the ANC was, of course, contrary to COSATU's official partnership with the ruling party. Despite attempts to convince the federation to reconsider that relationship, it expelled NUMSA less than a year later. Subsequent efforts to secure reinstatement were unsuccessful, exposing the weakness of NUMSA's supporters and the difficulty of breaking up the Alliance. Several months after NUMSA's expulsion, popular COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, a strong supporter of the metalworkers' union who had become increasingly critical of the ANC, was expelled from the federation as well.

This was a major symbolic moment for the South African labor movement. Essentially amounting to a purge of anti-ANC voices from COSATU, it marked a disintegration of the impressive solidarity that was forged during the heat of the anti-apartheid struggle. It also had serious organizational consequences. NUMSA had grown to over 300,000 members, making it the largest COSATU affiliate when the NUM lost many of its members after the Marikana massacre. These developments were a substantial blow to COSATU's membership numbers, particularly in the private sector, and accelerated its post-apartheid trend of growing reliance on public-sector workers.

In the wake of their expulsion, NUMSA and Vavi began to lay the foundation for a new trade-union federation that would compete with COSATU. Toward this end, more than 1,400 representatives of 29 trade unions as well as NACTU gathered for a preliminary Workers' Summit in May 2016. In March 2017, labor activists registered a new organization—tentatively named the South African Federation of Trade Unions—with the Department of Labor. It remains unclear, however, who will be included. Thus far the Food and Allied Workers Union is the only former COSATU affiliate (it withdrew in August 2016) believed to have joined forces with the new federation, which is scheduled to hold its official launching congress in late April.

South Africa's organized labor movement is now, arguably, weaker and more fragmented than at any other time in the past three decades. Disagreement over how unions should relate to the ruling party, the ANC, is central to this fragmentation. While the political orientation of the new federation remains unclear—the declaration of the 2016 Workers' Summit expressed a commitment to both a socialist orientation and independence from political parties—alignment with the ANC is certainly off the table. COSATU, meanwhile, remains firmly committed to its participation in the ANC-led Alliance.

Protesting precariousness

Amid these divisions, the labor movement also confronts fragmentation between unionized workers and their more precariously situated counterparts. As in much of the world, increasing flexibility and casualization—which often take the form of temporary and part-time work—undermine union strength. Indeed, in the post-apartheid era, market-based mechanisms are reconstituting patterns of control and exploitation that were previously secured through legalized racial domination. Compounding these trends is the problem of widespread, chronic unemployment. Between 2009 and 2014 the official unemployment rate hovered around 25 percent, while the broader jobless category that includes "discouraged work-seekers" was around 35 percent.

The organized labor movement in South Africa has had difficulty incorporating the more insecure and marginalized layers of the working class. Studies show, in fact, that unions have increasingly come to represent those layers that are more stable and secure. As of 2008, for example, more than 90 percent of COSATU members held permanent, full-time jobs, and two-thirds were employed in skilled, supervisory, or professional positions. Most workers who are either unemployed or in precarious jobs are therefore not in unions.

Against this backdrop, South Africa has experienced a persistent wave of local protests since the middle of the 2000s. Popularly known as "service delivery" protests, they tend to revolve around demands for community development and public services, including housing, electricity, water, toilets, roads, streetlights, health clinics, and recreational facilities. Taking place almost exclusively in impoverished black townships and informal settlements, these protests are propelled by the precarious layers of the workforce, especially unemployed youth. They are rarely associated with workplace organizing. Instead, they are typically organized by relatively small community-based

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groups and networks. To the extent that union members participate in these protests, they usually do so as individual community members rather than as part of some union-led effort.

In sharp contrast with the solidarity they showed during the apartheid era, unions have grown quite distant from community struggles in the post-apartheid period. Noting the desire of the COSATU leadership to "not only champion community struggles but to build a strong relationship between organized workers and mushrooming issue-based social movements," a 2011 secretariat report admitted that "this has not happened except in a few isolated cases." The report also acknowledged deepening fragmentation: "The danger of this is that a gulf may start to emerge between organized workers, who in the context of the grinding crisis of unemployment, poverty, and inequalities represent a privileged group, and the issue-based social movements."

This gulf reflects the reorganization of working classes since the height of anti-apartheid resistance. During the 1970s and 1980s, the fact that workers made up a substantial proportion of residents within black urban townships facilitated union involvement in community struggles. In a well-known 1982 speech, Joe Foster, president of the Federation of South African Trade Unions, argued: "That FOSATU should be involved in community activities is correct since our members form the major part of those communities." The prevalence of union members meant that they could play a leadership role and bring union organizing approaches into community struggles.

Foster's claim may have been a stretch, even in the early 1980s. Yet the situation nonetheless changed rapidly in subsequent decades. Partially due to the relaxation of restrictions on black movement, urbanization proceeded rapidly from the late 1980s and into the democratic period. The apartheid state had enforced "pass laws" intended to keep unemployed black residents trapped in rural areas. With the elimination of the pass laws in 1986, unemployment began to swell in the urban areas. Taken together, unemployment and precarious, nonunionized work diminished the prominence of union voices within impoverished urban areas, where community protests were concentrated.

Working-class fragmentation has important political consequences. Union members have access to organizational resources (union bureaucracies) that may be used to extract material concessions from employers. The unemployed and nonunionized workers tend to rely on smaller and more informal organizations, and direct their demands toward the state. On a tactical level, whereas unions tend to follow formal bureaucratic procedures, drawing strength from the threat of withdrawing labor power, community-based groups are more likely to use illegal tactics of disruption such as burning tires, barricading roads, and destroying property. These differences make it difficult to find common ground.

Despite its legacy of "social movement unionism," COSATU's partnership with the ANC further contributed to its unions' distance from community struggles. On the one hand, this partnership makes COSATU less reliant on mass mobilization to gain political influence. On the other hand, it means COSATU is, to a certain extent, aligned with the state. Stability thus becomes a priority. As community protests began to accelerate in the late 2000s, there were signs that COSATU viewed them as a problem to be resolved, not a progressive force that deserved solidarity and support. The fact that these protests were often quite critical of the state, and especially of local authorities, exacerbated the tension.

These patterns suggested that closing the gap between workplace organizing and community-based resistance might require unions to distance themselves from the ruling party. Such a split came with NUMSA's break from the ANC and subsequent expulsion from COSATU.

A UNITED FRONT?

The NUMSA break was made official during a Special National Congress of the metalworkers' union in December 2013. More than just a withdrawal of support for the ruling party, the move charted a new political pathway for the labor movement. Two resolutions approved by delegates at the meeting were especially notable. One called on NUMSA to explore the possibility of building a "Movement for Socialism" through the formation of a new political party for workers. The other resolution called for establishing a United Front that would "coordinate" workplace and community struggles, uniting them around a common opposition to neoliberal policies. In breaking from the Alliance, NUMSA sought to take the lead in forging a new left politics.

The Movement for Socialism took off slowly. In August 2014, NUMSA hosted an International Symposium of Left Parties and Movements in an

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attempt to glean lessons from abroad. The event brought together representatives from 17 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. This was followed by a Conference on Socialism in April 2015, which comprised South African leftists. As of early 2017, however, a new party had not yet been formed.

The United Front project appeared to take shape more quickly. NUMSA's moves reinvigorated South Africa's relatively small political left wing, sparking hopes of a renewed socialist movement. The Democratic Left Front (DLF), a social-movement organization active in various urban centers across the country, threw its support behind NUMSA and the United Front. Over the previous decade and a half, due largely to its alignment with the ruling party, COSATU had distanced itself from left-leaning organizations such as DLF. Now that NUMSA had broken ranks with the ANC, such alliances became possible. Seemingly overnight, a dramatic realignment of progressive forces had occurred.

Initially, the United Front focused on "joint struggles" to bring together organized labor and community-based activists. The movement's first major public action was a Strike for Youth Jobs in March 2014, which featured a one-day work stoppage by NUMSA members and protest marches in multiple cities. The main demonstration in Johannesburg drew as many as 10,000 people, including a host of community-based activists and supporters of the recently formed Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party. Founded in 2013 by expelled former leaders of the ANC Youth League, EFF describes itself as "radical, leftist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist."

Resistance to the apartheid state created a strong basis for working-class solidarity.

At a protest against police brutality just a few days later, which drew mostly community-based activists, NUMSA organizer Dinga Sikwebu celebrated the building of solidarity through common action. Noting that he had seen some of the same faces at the Strike for Youth Jobs, Sikwebu remarked: "The only way that we are going to be able to join the dots between organized workers and community organizations is to support each other's struggles. . . . It's only in the trenches, when we are running from police, that we will ask, 'By the way comrade, what is your name?' because I have seen you in a struggle before."

Over time, however, the emphasis shifted away from joint struggles and toward laying the foundation of a bureaucratic organization. A National Working Committee was established in December 2014, along with regional and local substructures in several provinces. At the lowest level, NUMSA encouraged the formation of local Political Discussion Forums, which would serve as meeting points for workers and community activists. However, the United Front stalled when it came to establishing a national-level organization. On at least two occasions, it announced the date for an official national launch, only to postpone it.

Uncertain path

By early 2016, the initial energy stirred up by the United Front appeared to have dissipated. Its declining popularity and strength was driven home by the 2016 local government elections. In some places, such as the Eastern Cape, the United Front essentially ran as a political party by putting up its own candidates. In others, such as Gauteng, it agreed to support local candidates with ties to community-based organizations. United Front candidates barely made a dent. The movement's best performance was in the municipality of Nelson Mandela Bay, the key battleground of the Eastern Cape, where the United Front secured less than 1 percent of the vote and just a single seat out of 120 on the town council.

The future of NUMSA's various projects—the new trade-union federation, the United Front, the socialist-leaning Workers' Party—remains unclear. It seems quite possible that the United Front will become a declining priority as the other two projects gain speed, building a union/party alliance to rival the long-standing alliance between COSATU and the ANC. There is still considerable doubt, however, about whether these projects will be able to attract and sustain a popular base.

Much like their counterparts across the globe, working-class movements in South Africa confront two major forms of fragmentation. One is a fragmentation with respect to electoral politics, which in South Africa involves the question of how to relate to the ruling ANC. The other is a fragmentation within the labor force—stable union jobs versus precarious work or unemployment—that manifests itself in a division between workplace-based struggles and community-based struggles.

The prospects for renewal of the left currently appear rather bleak, though the ANC is beginning

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to show signs of weakness. Following a poor performance in the 2016 local government elections, the ANC lost control of the city of Johannesburg, the national capital city of Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay. The main beneficiary of the ANC's decline thus far, however, has been the center-right Democratic Alliance.

The SACP grew increasingly critical of Zuma and the ANC after the 2016 elections. But whether the Communists will be courageous enough to break with the ruling party is a huge question, as is whether the party would be capable of leading a renewal of the left even if it braved the political waters on its own. These weaknesses of the left reflect, and also reinforce, divisions within the working class.

While there are no clear signs that either division will be healed anytime soon, the political situation in the country remains extremely fluid. Mounting tensions surround the controversial figure of Zuma. In March 2017, Zuma's decision to reshuffle the cabinet—including the dismissal of Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan and his deputy Mcebisi Jonas—sparked mass resistance led by civil society organizations and political parties. Two major protests in Tshwane, on April 7 and April 12, drew tens of thousands of residents calling for Zuma's removal. The larger of the two protests featured a coalition of opposition parties, with the EFF taking the lead. COSATU and the SACP also called for Zuma to resign, though neither organization broke ranks with the ruling party.

It is difficult to predict how these tensions will be resolved. Zuma currently awaits a looming no-confidence vote in parliament. Regardless of how that vote unfolds, Zuma's tenure as ANC president will most likely end in December 2017. His second and final term as head of state ends in 2019, if he is not removed earlier. Looking ahead, crucial questions include the extent to which the ANC will be able to manage its deepening crisis of legitimacy, and how effectively opposition parties can translate growing anti-Zuma sentiment into electoral success. Perhaps an even more important question is whether progressive forces will be able to seize the moment for renewal by healing the divisions in South Africa's working-class movements. ■

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