

Forging a New Movement against Neoliberalism in South Africa

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) Cut Ties with the African National Congress (ANC)

By [Socialist Project](#)

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The decision of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa ([NUMSA](#)) to cut ties with the African National Congress (ANC) has received poor analysis. Comment has tended to focus on the possibility of a new political party in 2019 or whether all this means that suspended general secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) Zwelinzima Vavi will get his job back. The greater significance of the biggest trade union in the country throwing in its lot with a growing movement in opposition to the neoliberal order, and thus to the left of the ANC, rather than the line up to the right is being missed.



NUMSA Engineers on strike. [Photo: [Cherisse Fredricks/Flickr](#)]

This very week [NUMSA](#) is holding a [national political school](#), which culminates in an “expo” of forces of resistance, to which activists and communities that have been active in service delivery struggles, have been invited. This is part of NUMSA’s declared commitment to what it calls a “united front” from below.

In discussing the events unleashed by the [Marikana massacre](#), some of us have been declaring that the seeds of a new movement have been sown. But equipped only with the notions of political parties, trade unions and other such organizational forms, commentators have been ill equipped to grapple with the meaning of this notion of a movement.

Movements in Motion

We have lived for the past 20 odd-years with the marginalization of ordinary people from any power over their own lives. For at least half those years millions of people were not active in campaigns and in contesting the quality of their lives, as they gave the ANC (the party that had stood at the head of the liberation movement) a chance to express in legislation and in practice what people had envisioned from that movement. In practice, the anti-apartheid movement was laid to rest. Politics therefore became the exclusive terrain of political parties, particularly those represented in parliament. And parliament replaced the streets, factories and communities where political parties were expected to earn their credibility.

The people, as political agents in a broad mass movement, were replaced by the individual voter participating in secret at the ballot box once every five years. Occasional flare-ups or disputes were settled through the courts. The press conference replaced the mass rally as the means whereby politicians talked to the people. Journalistic comment and media reports therefore only knew about political parties and their press conferences.

This is not a uniquely South African phenomenon. Globally this passive citizenry has, until now, been the stuff of the political terrain in all countries for nearly 30 years. The last three decades were also the years of the triumph of [neoliberal](#) capitalism and the biggest attacks on the living standards of ordinary people since World War I.

Neoliberalism relies on the passivity of ordinary people and the complicity of all political parties that have confined politics to the world of the ballot box and the press conference. But South Africa had an active mass movement until the 1980s, so our neoliberalism would have to await the triumph of an ANC de-linked from that mass movement – transformed in its own language from a “liberation movement to a political party.”

Our trade unions also evolved from a labour movement seeking broader social transformation to a set of trade unions indulging in collective bargaining within the range prescribed by labour relations law. They too would have their parliamentary officers tracking new labour laws and the press conference replacing the factory general meetings and the mass rallies of their constituencies.

So the movement was replaced by a party and the party by its leadership and the leadership by a few individuals. And political comment has become obsessed with the cult of individuals. We have even lost the language to distinguish between a movement, parties, organizations and individuals.

For the past 10 years we have had community protests in every township across the country. But because these did not fit the mould of political parties and press conferences, they did not make the media. And where commentators reflected on these it was only, until recently, as instances of “unrest” and criminality.

A movement is not the same as a party, although parties may seek hegemony within a movement. A movement is also not the same as an organization, although myriads of organizations, large and small, may make up a movement. Sometimes commentators failing to understand this notion of a movement call acts of popular resistance, which make up a movement, “spontaneous” because they cannot identify well-known leaders. Thereby denying the agency of ordinary people and their capacity for tactical and strategic acumen.

The movement that grew to a peak in the 1980s was one that had a number of features. First, there was a common enemy that unified the movement. That enemy was apartheid and all the associated 1970s reforms that the government tried, which were seen as mere attempts at prolonging apartheid. Second, all localized struggles against this or that instance of injustice were seen as code for resisting apartheid. So local struggles fed into the national movement. All reforms were rejected and institutions boycotted. This was not because this or that organization issued such an instruction, but because the movement had established this as its prerogative. This sometimes meant that even a small organization could call for a march or a boycott way beyond its actual organizational capacity because such a call corresponded with the mood of the movement.

The ANC had sunk deep roots in the 1950s movement and its status was cemented after going into exile. But the ANC did not “organize” the movement, let alone prescribe what people should do. When the ANC contemplated some tactical turn, which went against the tenets of the movement, it had to tread warily and try very hard to persuade the movement, and the outcome wasn’t guaranteed.

“Broad Church”?

By definition a movement is heterogeneous, comprising such a range of experiences and organizational forms that no party or single organization can encompass that range. The mass movement of the 1980s recognized the ANC as having the leading role, but the ANC was by no means the only political force, and when people joined the ANC they brought all these different tendencies and experiences to the ANC and made it what ANC-apologists love to call today, a “broad church.”

Which is why the Marikana massacre was such a historic moment. It signalled that the ANC is no longer a “broad church” but a party of the very rich – those whose interests must be defended, violently, if necessary. In so doing, it freed activists from any further illusions of transforming the ANC into the movement it was in the 1980s. It meant that all the local struggles in communities of the past 15 years and all the workplace struggles that broke out after Marikana no longer look to the ANC and its allies for strength. They look to themselves.

It now means that any development in the political or labour sphere will be measured against the rising tide of a movement, which no longer looks to the ANC or any of the parties in parliament, or any labour desk in the tripartite National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) for any hope of a better future. Even [Julius Malema](#) [former leader of ANC-Youth] has recognized this – giving up his career as a chicken farmer to start a new party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which speaks, opportunistically, the language of this new movement. This is what the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) is discovering now. Workers swamped its ranks because it wasn’t the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). Now workers want AMCU to be part of a new movement and to be a broad church. And AMCU is simply not equipped to be so.

The aftermath of Marikana also revealed that the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) stood outside and in opposition to this new movement. Such a position for a federation that once had deep roots in the working-class was surely going to precipitate tensions within its ranks.

The anti-Mbeki Forces Unravel

So, to the NUMSA Special National Congress of December 2013 and its decisions.

Most comment has without fail reduced this to the decision not to back the ANC in the 2014 elections and largely to ascribe this to the suspension of Vavi. This makes for facile comment and for easy but false resolution. All COSATU needs to do is reinstate Vavi and the war will be over.

This may well be the position of those COSATU affiliates who have championed a special congress to review Vavi’s suspension. But, like Malema’s EFF, the background events to the NUMSA fight in COSATU can be traced to the make-up of disgruntled forces that overthrew [Thabo Mbeki](#) as ANC president. The South African Communist Party (SACP), COSATU and the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) were a coterie of conspirators who made a pact with Jacob Zuma

that in return for seats at the table of the state, they would champion a deeply flawed individual into the highest office.

Mbeki had had no truck with those for whom the state was merely a vehicle for private wealth projects and lost little time dealing with Zuma, his own deputy president, who was caught doing precisely this. But this opened the door for a layer of disgruntled elements – some with their own agendas of seeking a state for rentier capitalism and others with political axes to grind. These forces rallied together behind the SACP, COSATU and the ANCYL to drive Mbeki out after making a Faustian pact with Zuma.

And what did the Zuma project deliver? Cabinet positions for individual COSATU, SACP and ANCYL leaders and a veritable culture of cronyism and looting of the state. Then the ladder of advancement was whisked away and when Malema over-reached himself, he was expelled ... and so the erstwhile-unified forces of disgruntlement unravelled.

Meanwhile throughout the Mbeki years the victims of his neoliberalism – the new working-class of urban and rural poor, the youth and the unemployed – have been in increasing revolt, a revolt of service delivery protests carried out beneath the radar of middle-class public opinion. The system of labour relations and compliant trade unions kept a lid on the rising dissatisfaction in the industrial sphere until the revolts spilled over into the communities surrounding the platinum mines in the North West and found a disgraced NUM incapable of having any moral authority to police the dissent. And then came Marikana ...

Of all the conspirators, the SACP is most distant from struggles and cannot fathom an independent existence outside the state. The SACP has nowhere else to go except to act as the Rottweiler of the Zuma regime, turning first on Malema and then on COSATU. Vavi's sexual power games may have provided the ammunition but it was the SACP that turned on its ex-ally. But instead of kowtowing to the SACP line, Marikana has also emboldened a NUMSA leadership to contemplate mutiny.

Why NUMSA?

NUMSA has always been the left critic within COSATU. Its roots can be found in the traditions of the independent socialism of the Federation of South African Trade unions (FOSATU) and the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), which precede the formation of COSATU – a tradition to the left of the SACP and long castigated as “workerism” by the SACP and the ANC since the 1980s.

Not that NUMSA was ever politically monolithic. Its leadership cadre make up was always an entente between a political group located within the Eastern Cape SACP, an old independent socialist layer coming from the Witwatersrand region and a layer of syndicalist policy technocrats. This entente made NUMSA unique within COSATU and saw it campaign for a Workers' Charter in 1987 and for COSATU to break with the tripartite alliance in 1993. Already in the run-up to the ANC's 2009 Polokwane conference there were moves within COSATU to discipline NUMSA for not being enthusiastic enough backers of the Zuma project.

And unlike the public sector unions that dominate COSATU (from whence its Zuma-loyal president, Sdumo Dlamini, comes) and where the membership is a new middle class of white-collar workers, NUMSA still has the blue-collar workers of its militant days in the steel and engineering companies of the Witwatersrand, KwaZulu-Natal and the Vaal.

With the break-up of the old Zuma alliance, it is therefore not surprising that it is NUMSA that has responded in the way that it has. It is also significant that NUMSA members took their decisions at a special congress preceded by a process of political discussion and democratic debate from their locals and regions.

Obsessed by the forthcoming 2014 general elections and with only a short-term understanding of politics, the media have struggled to understand the NUMSA developments. So it's either about making up an alliance with EFF (you see they're all left wing, so they must be together) or it's all about personalities like Vavi (where NUMSA's initiative is viewed as little more than a ploy to save Vavi's career).

If we're only looking at the 2014 general elections or if we examine this situation only through the lens of trade unionism, then we miss the significance of the NUMSA split entirely.

All great parties in the world, conservative or progressive, came about as outcomes of long-gestating social movements. The U.S. Democrats can trace their roots to small farmers of the South resisting the freeing of slaves and the struggles of the Civil War, while the Republicans were the party of the northern industrialists. The British Labour Party has a social movement lineage going back to the Chartist movement of the 19th century and emerged out of struggles by trade unions to find an electoral voice. The ANC outgrew its elite roots amongst chiefs and "educate natives" to head up a mass anti-apartheid movement since the 1950s.

For years many have bemoaned the fact that the quality of South Africa's democracy is hampered by the absence of a political alternative to the left of the ANC. All the political parties in parliament support the quest of South African corporations to be internationally competitive while endorsing the neoliberal GEAR economic program and the privatization of public services. All base themselves on the flawed compromises that established the constitutional order at Kempton Park.

For long now that absence has been seen as rectifiable simply by conjuring up a left party to fill the gap.

After the Marikana massacre and its subsequent strike wave, there was much talk about the seeds of a new movement being sown. The significance of the NUMSA initiative is precisely that it takes forward this narrative. Why? Because it states unequivocally that the future of South Africa lies in a movement to the left of the ANC and, by seeking to find common cause with township activists and militant workers on the platinum belt who have been struggling for the past decade. It is an implicit acknowledgement that a new movement is already underway.

This does not mean that there will not be difficulties, as NUMSA seeks to find space within this new movement. For one, NUMSA has not yet begun to reflect politically on the sources of the ANC's shift to becoming a neoliberal party and even mistakenly takes the National Development Plan as that Rubicon-crossing moment, rather than the compromises at Kempton Park or GEAR. For another, it hasn't yet done an assessment of the appropriateness of the trade union form in the context of the changing working-class under neoliberalism. Rather, it seeks to keep the union form, but merely organize workers within the "pipeline" of manufacture.

Nevertheless, NUMSA's commitment to a movement for socialism is appropriate as is the idea of a "united front" from below, understood as a program of joint campaigns with other movements and community groups rather than a political party. It seeks to start the process by convening a political school, which creates spaces for social movements to participate. This may overcome a long-standing weakness whereby working-class communities have been struggling, while unionized workers have been dormant. In doing so, it offers the possibility that the nearly 10-year revolt of the poor may be complemented by an industrial partner and so help to forge such a national movement worthy of that cause. •

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