

South Africa's Ruling ANC Party: Where is the Left?

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by Chris Webb

About a month ago I stood with some 200 striking farm workers in South Africa's Hex River Valley, a rich agricultural region that produces table grapes for export. The workers were on strike against severe pay cuts and outsourcing, which came about when a major fruit export company took over the farm from its previous owner. The workers were a mixed group. Some were Zimbabwean migrants, but the majority were Xhosa speakers from the more impoverished Eastern Cape, where 72 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line. Most of them currently lived in the valley's informal settlements, expanses of matchbox houses and zinc shacks on the dusty ground between the grape farms. As we marched toward the farm, the workers began to sing struggle songs praising the African National Congress (ANC) and the role of struggle leaders like [Oliver Tambo](#) and [Chris Hani](#).

The songs and circumstances seemed to capture the complexities and paradoxical politics that define the post-apartheid condition. While the promises of the political transition in 1994, the ANC's "A Better Life For All" campaign, have been largely unfulfilled, the idea of the ANC as the agent of political emancipation remains very much alive. How then can we make sense of a political organization that has largely accepted the dictates of global neoliberalism, failed to restructure the country's apartheid-era labour markets, allowed a handful of white commercial farmers to retain most of the country's land, is embroiled in near endless corruption scandals, yet retains the support of millions of poor and working-class South Africans at least once every four years?

Of Struggle and SUVs

The ANC is a difficult beast to understand. In its contemporary form it is perhaps most adequately described by writer and activist Patrick Bond's useful "Talk Left, Walk Right" phrase, which describes its strategy of justifying neoliberal or anti-democratic policies using Marxist phraseology and obligatory allusions to struggle heroes. This has been a crucial tactic for the party in maintaining the hegemony across the class divide and asserting its dominance as the sole inheritor of the liberation struggle. Numerous scholars have emphasized the diversity of political, religious and labour movements that comprised the anti-apartheid movement, rather than viewing the ANC and its armed wing as the primary actors.

There remains significant debate over the political character of the ANC before the transition to majority rule in 1994. Was it forced to abandon radical redistributive reforms by the World Bank and the ruling white elite, or were its economic ambitions always more moderate? Did the collapse of the Soviet Union bury its aims of socialist transformation? Moving forward one could question whether the transition from the mildly redistributive

Reconstruction and Development Program policy in 1994 to the pro-market Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy in 1996 was a sign of shifting class alliances within, or simply a party pragmatically adapting to the dictates of globalization.

A closer examination of the party's history can help us answer some of these questions. If we return to some of the debates that shaped the party in the mid 20th century it becomes clear that its primary concern was the pursuit of state power with the goal of universal suffrage. The party's ambitions were only socialist to the extent that they fraternized with the South African Communist Party (SACP). This is not to suggest that the party's politics have always been homogeneous: the influence of Marxists like Harry Gwala, Govan Mbeki and Chris Hani was significant. Indeed, these internal ideological rifts and debates between Liberal, Marxist and African nationalists tendencies have defined much of the party's history, including a strong anti-communist current that emerged in the 1950s. The political heterogeneity and the vigorous internal debate that were once key strengths of the party as it faced the material and ideological barrage of the apartheid state have eroded in recent years as a creeping culture of discipline and deference to leadership has taken over.

Ultimately the school of thought that emerged triumphant did not see the 1955 [Freedom Charter](#) as a pathway toward socialist transformation but rather as a means toward establishing a capitalist democracy. This would be the prelude to a socialist state, but in the interim, the ANC would fight against racism rather than capitalism. Known as the National Democratic Revolution (NDR), this two-stage theory of revolution (a Stalinist hangover to be sure) remains on the books as the party's guidebook of societal transformation. While its first phase, the deracialization of the economy, has progressed significantly, the second phase of a socialist transition is an ever-receding goal on the horizon. This ossified political doctrine has allowed the party to retain its radical credentials while using it to enrich a small coterie of black business people who are its primary beneficiaries.

Polokwane Conference in 2007

Another good starting point for understanding the current state of the ANC is to return to the ouster of former president Thabo Mbeki at the ANC's Polokwane conference in 2007. Mbeki was widely criticized as an out-of-touch president more interested in quelling conflicts in the rest of Africa than dealing with spiraling unemployment and poor service delivery at home. His bizarre position on the HIV-Aids epidemic, along with his near-thorough embrace of orthodox neoliberalism, distanced him from the ANC's historic allies in the tripartite alliance, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the SACP. The fall of Mbeki and the rise of Jacob Zuma can be explained by the widening gap between the ANC and its alliance partners as well as between the presidency and party's base. Zuma's popularity amongst ANC members, particularly in his home province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, along with his long history in the organization earned him the support of many rank-and-file members. Perhaps most importantly, he successfully framed himself as a voice of the poor and working-class, earning him the support of COSATU and the SACP. Rape and corruption charges aside, supporting Zuma during this time was seen as a way of regenerating the ANC and the alliance structures.

COSATU's General Secretary Zwelenzima Vavi [recently told](#) a trade union congress that the euphoria felt after Polokwane had not returned the ANC back to members, nor had it held government to account. "If we don't act decisively, we are heading rapidly in the direction of a full-blown predator state, in which a powerful elite increasingly controls the state as a vehicle for accumulation," he told delegates. Accumulation of personal wealth via state

channels has embroiled the ANC in scandals too numerous to list. Perhaps the most notable among them is the 1999 arms deal, which involved massive payouts from European Arms companies to senior ANC politicians. The case reached a fever pitch in 2005, when Zuma was temporarily suspended as deputy president after his close advisor was jailed for his role in the arms deal scandal. Current vice-president Kgalema Motlanthe has called this moral decay of the organization a “rot across the board.” Almost every project is conceived because it offers opportunities for certain people to make money. And yet this moral decay of the party is an inevitable outcome of its adherence to the myopic NDR and piecemeal deracialization of corporate boardrooms.

The ANC has not undergone any significant ideological transformation under Zuma. Economic and labour market policy has stayed the course of the Mbeki years, and there have been few attempts at addressing spiraling unemployment, particularly among young people. A system of “regulated labour flexibility” remains central to the party’s market-friendly policies, which has resulted in the massive growth of contingent and contract employment across the economy. [Unions have estimated](#) that between one and two million workers are employed through third-party contract agencies. This growing insecurity of employment has condemned those lucky enough to find work to poverty and increasing indebtedness, while preventing effective organization of a growing class of precarious workers.

Following the Polokwane conference the ANC under Zuma has repeatedly made commitments to rural development and agrarian reform. The government has released a series of policy documents outlining its vision for broad agrarian transformation aimed at challenging the political economy of rural underdevelopment. Closer examination of these documents reveals that they remain conceptually tied to a commercial farming model that has done little to generate sustainable employment in the past. The much discussed Green Paper on Land Reform is not a significant break from the pro-market, investor friendly policies of years past, which have left 87 per cent of the land in the hands of white commercial farmers. It is a serious indictment of ANC policymaking that for the past 18 years there has been no systematic attempt to address rural poverty and landlessness. It is indeed unfortunate that there is no rural social movement capable of taking up the mantle of agrarian transformation toward sustainable livelihoods at present.

Recently the party has attempted to quell criticism by releasing a series of new economic platforms, each murkier than the one before, on how to create decent employment while sustaining high levels of growth. The New Growth Path (NGP), released in early 2011, is filled with rhetorical flourishes on the creation of decent work and alleviating poverty but, [in the words of COSATU](#), it “does not represent a breakthrough in economic thinking and in economic policy.” The party’s appeal to East Asian Developmentalism and Scandinavian social democracy does not fit the realities of an economic structure built, primarily, around a core mining sector supported by a base of cheap labour. The document offers a limited role for the state, once again casting private business as the core driver of economic growth. In any event it is not clear what the future of the NGP is as a recently released National Development Plan proposes a far less interventionist role for the state. It will be up to delegates at the ANC’s leadership conference this December to make their pick.

Mangaung in the Shadow of Marikana

This December ANC delegates will gather in the party’s birthplace, Mangaung, to choose the party’s next leader and discuss policy matters. The murder of [34 miners at Marikana](#) and

the strike wave that spread like wildfire across the mining sector will surely be hot topics, but whether they will result in another Polokwane moment is doubtful. The messaging coming out of a recent COSATU conference has been to place the blame squarely on the mining company, Lonmin, and its poverty wages and poor housing rather than questioning the role of the state in the massacre. This, in all likelihood, will be the result of the official state investigation into the massacre, which will absolve the state or the national police commissioner of any wrongdoing. No inquiry, however, can erase the images of black South African police officers gunning down miners. [The subsequent revelations by the Daily Maverick](#) of an orchestrated slaughter cannot be brushed aside lightly for incoming party leadership.

While the ANC washes its hands of the matter it cannot hope to escape the aftermath of Marikana anytime soon. First, the fact that the inheritor of the liberation struggle massacred its own citizens, many of whom voted for the ANC, arrested their fellow protesters and subsequently accused them of murdering their own coworkers using an archaic piece of apartheid-era legislation has massive symbolic significance. The allegations of police torture that emerged soon after adds fuel to the fire. Second, there is the meteoric rise of political firebrand Julius Malema from the political wilderness to a renegade leader of striking mineworkers to be considered.

Malema, the former leader of the ANC Youth League, has emerged as a media phenomenon and significant political force following the massacre. He visited with the striking miners days after the massacre, paid for many of their funerals, and went on a whirlwind tour of the platinum belt, urging workers to die for their cause of R12,500 a month in wages (\$1,500 CAD) rather than give up the fight. While Malema's sympathy for the struggle of the working-class emerges more from opportunist populism than genuine class solidarity, he was the only figure able to capitalize on glaring absence of political leadership following the massacre. Whatever you may think of his rather muddled politics, he was the only figure who received a warm reception from striking miners compared the cold shoulder received by Zuma and many other ANC higher ups. The vitriol and accusations made against him by the ANC and alliance partners speaks to a growing crisis of political leadership. The disaffection of thousands of miners from the historically dominant National Union of Mineworkers to breakaway unions promising greater wages and greater representation speaks to the unraveling of working-class identities from the alliance.

While there was little of substance that came out of the most recent COSATU conference, aside for the renewed call for strategic nationalization and a call for a "Lula Moment" (referencing the popular former president of Brazil, Lula da Silva) in South Africa, this lack of action belies the fact that the federation faces significant challenges in representing the most vulnerable workers in the economy. They have been largely unsuccessful in organizing the country's growing precariat, and many of their calls for basic income grants, strategic nationalization and increased land reform have gone unfulfilled. Nevertheless, COSATU's ability to mobilize millions of workers, as they did in early March, should not be underestimated. It is in the interest of all South African workers to see a stronger and more democratic trade union federation rather than one plagued by petty rivalries and leadership battles. However, it is unlikely that this will come about without some distance between the federation and the ANC.

Where is the Left?

While the tide of social movements in South Africa has receded lately, a spattering of radical

grassroots formations continue to struggle against housing evictions, the intransigence of corrupt councillors and politicians, and the daily privations of living in the most unequal society in the world. Organizations like [Abahlali baseMjondolo](#) and the Unemployed People's Movement remain incredibly important in confronting the legacy of apartheid-era spatial engineering and cheap labour policies. As important as these movements are in confronting the violence endemic to post-apartheid society, they have not yet galvanized mass support nor demonstrated that they have the political potential to constitute a serious counter-hegemonic effort.

At present there is no organization or party able to channel the anger that millions of South Africans feel into a transformative political project. The increase in service delivery protests since 2004, which have resulted in repeated clashes with the police and numerous deaths, are desperate struggles of the poor against the daily injustices bred by severe poverty and inequality. These protests are often aimed at achieving immediate demands for the poor (an end to the bucket system of toilets or electricity delivery, for example), and they represent a growing dissatisfaction with the ruling party that can easily be co-opted by savvy politicians – the role of the ANC Youth League in service delivery protests in the Western Cape is but one example. In their present form, however, they do not represent a significant challenge to the status quo. More often than not they are quietened by a visit by an ANC MP or the expansion of housing developments in a township.

There is a desperate need for an organization to give voice to their demands while pushing for structural reforms. The formation of the Democratic Left Front as a broad alliance of social movements struggling collectively within an anti-capitalist framework is heartening in this regard. It remains to be seen whether this movement can provide a platform through which social movements can broaden their scope of action and pose a significant challenge. In addition, the formation of a Campaign for Solidarity with Marikana is a positive step in building bridges between social forces and keeping the memory of those slain by police alive in collective memory.

These formations, and the anti-capitalist politics underpinning them, will be increasingly important in confronting a ruling party intent on bludgeoning its own citizenry into submission. It is a significant undertaking, and will require new forms of political organizing and action that can combine the process of meeting the immediate needs of the poor with a long-term structural transformation of South African society. It calls for a renewed imagining of post-apartheid society, which counters the stale rhetoric of state developmentalism or the National Democratic Revolution. In the [words of the late Neville Alexander](#), it is a process of, “find[ing] unity in action just as we find new ways of seeing the struggle for another world and another South Africa.” •

Chris Webb is a writer and activist based in Toronto. He is a member of the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly and a columnist for *Canadian Dimension* magazine.

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