

The Fight for a Socialist South Africa: Racial Disparities in Wealth Increased Since the End of Formal Apartheid

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South Africa's most militant labor leaders are pressing forward with plans to build a real socialist party to challenge the ANC government's capitulation to global capitalism. ANC loyalists this week locked the country's largest union and the labor federation's former general secretary out of a COSATU special Congress. The two traveled to the U.S., last week, seeking help from activists that supported the "Free South Africa" movement in the 80s.

"By the end of next week, the opportunity to reform COSATU may be gone," said Zwelinzima Vavi, the former general secretary of the South African labor confederation that was once a pillar of the struggle against white minority rule, but now acts as an extension of the ruling political party, the African National Congress (ANC). Vavi was ousted from the Congress of South African Trade Unions, in March, for [opposing the expulsion](#) of the 365,000-strong metal workers union, last November, after NUMSA announced that it would no longer support the ANC and would, instead, continue to build a United Front of socialist movements with the aim of creating [a genuine workers party](#) to challenge the government.

Speaking alongside Vavi, last week, in the mid-town Manhattan offices of singer-activist Harry Belafonte's family business, was Irvin Jim, the metal workers union chief. The two labor leaders were on the second leg of a whirlwind trip to Washington and New York, to connect with U.S. supporters of a true transition of power to the people of South Africa. "This is the time to look for alternatives" to COSATU, Irvin Jim told the roomful of activists, many of them veterans of the "Free South Africa" campaigns of more than a generation ago. "There is no turning back."

Vavi's prediction was right. On Monday and Tuesday, a tumultuous special congress of COSATU accepted the credentials of a shake-and-bake, ANC-backed façade called the "Liberated Metal Workers of South Africa" to take NUMSA's place in the labor federation. A bid to reinstate Vavi as COSATU general secretary was also defeated, as expected. The credentials debate [took ten hours](#) to resolve, ending with a show-of-hands vote in a hall filled with guests and "observers." Media were unexpectedly [barred from much of the proceedings](#), and many delegates from NUMSA's allied unions abandoned the process in disgust.

NUMSA's appeal of its expulsion has been put off until the next regular COSATU congress, in November, by which time, as Irvin Jim told U.S. supporters in New York, its "Liberated" replacements will be sitting in the metal workers' chairs at the federation's leadership table, representing virtually no one.

This is not a U.S.-style labor fight for perks and privileges. “This battle goes to the core of building an economy and democratic state that works for all,” said Vavi, a former child laborer and metal worker who takes his socialism very seriously. So does Irvin Jim, whose family tried to scratch out a living as landless farmers. “For me, class is a driving force. We are struggling to advance humanity against the forces of greed.”

For Zwelinzima Vavi and his comrades, the transition to Black electoral rule in 1994 was to have been the beginning, not the conclusion, of a process of social transformation. “Our struggle was never about Black people standing beside their former oppressors and putting papers in a ballot box.”

The ballot brought an ANC government, buttressed by the two other legs of the anti-apartheid triple alliance: COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP). COSATU has been reduced to the “[labor desk](#)” of the ANC, while the SACP “[sold out](#)” to global capitalism at the very start of majority rule, as SACP-ANC veteran Ronnie Kasrils has written.

“There is a brutal exploitation of the working class, in the mines, farms and workplaces, to keep them in the status of wage slaves,” said Vavi. Under the ANC’s neoliberal policies, racial disparities in wealth have actually increased since the end of formal apartheid. Horrific state violence against workers has also returned, with the massacre of 34 miners at Marikana in 2012 – a crime for which the ANC government has found [not one person responsible](#).

Vavi ticked off the statistics:

Unemployment has worsened, to more than 36 percent.

50 percent of youth below the age of 25 are unemployed

Poverty has escalated to 54.3 percent of the people.

26 million live on “below a U.S. dollar a day.”

50 percent of kids drop out of school “before the age of 12.”

“This is what breeds a cycle of poverty among the working class,” said Vavi, with the rhetorical question: “Why did we make these sacrifices against apartheid, if this is the result?”

President Jacob Zuma, whom South African labor supported to replace the cold and calculating neoliberalism of President Thabo Mbeki, in 2009, “proved to be the worst thing we have ever done to the working class. It was our mistake,” said Vavi. “We got so angry at Mbeki and his neoliberal programs,” as well as his denial that HIV was transmitted by sex – leading to the death of “360,000 to 400,000 South Africans.”

The South African state is failing, as are state-owned enterprises, as a direct result of the neoliberal straightjacket. There are “blackouts every day, because of previous attempts to privatize electricity,” he said. “Billions and billions of rand are being wasted through corruption, which has been institutionalized” in the ANC. Such corruption is more than simple theft; it is built into the system that South Africa’s leaders have embraced. “The fight against corruption is a fight against the capitalist system.”

Wild Charges in Jo'Burg

In Johannesburg on Tuesday, COSATU president S'dumo Dlamini gloated that he had pulled off a victory in locking Vavi and Irvin Jim's NUMSA out of the federation. "There was no blood on the floor," said Dlamini. "We are building COSATU." The eight unions allied with NUMSA, who together with the metal workers make up a majority of South African organized labor, surely see things differently.

Dlamini then charged that Zwelinzima Vavi and Irvin Jim had traveled to the United States on a mission of "regime change" - that they had become part of the "American system." According to press reports, in a howlingly ridiculous inversion of who is upholding socialist values, Dlamini said Vavi and Jim and the "American system" can be defeated and workers should be inspired by the release of the Cuban Five who were held for 15 years as political prisoners in the United States.

As Vavi said of Jacob Zuma, Dlamini likes to "talk Marxism." But he behaves like an agent of capital.

In December, after the next Congress of COSATU, NUMSA officially launches the United Front, a methodical step in building support for a party that that will fight for a socialist South Africa. NUMSA is also exploring alternatives to COSATU, since the labor federation clearly cannot be reformed from within. As Irvin Jim told his audience of New York City activists, the current South African state "represents the dominant classes in society, which exploit the workers." That's why the police massacre at Marikana happened. The ANC government "wanted to teach the working class a lesson: that if you act in your interest, we will kill you."

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