

Social-Movement Unionism in South Africa: A Strategy for Working Class Solidarity?^b

By Ravi Naidoo*

In recent decades, it has become fashionable to predict that labor movements will soon fade into irrelevance. *Farewell to the Working Class* – the title of a 1980 book by French social theorist Andre Gorz – captures this mood well. Within the left, this pessimism is most evident among observers of labor movements in the global North, which have in recent years seen sustained declines in their membership and the loss of their long-standing “social partner” arrangements.

According to Kim Moody’s *Workers in a Lean World*, however, the number of industrial workers in the global South is on the rise – from 285 million in 1980 to 407 million in 1994. Indeed, Moody reports, the industrial working class in selected northern (OECD) countries actually grew slightly between 1973 and 1994. The ranks of the industrial working class, the traditional bedrock of unionism, are on the whole not declining. And in the more-industrialised southern countries, such as Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa, union membership is actually growing. For example, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has grown from 1.3 million members in 1994 to over 1.8 million today, an increase of 40% in six years. Overall levels of union membership in South Africa exceed 50% of formal-sector employment. There is certainly little evidence of trade-union decline.

The composition of the working class, however, is changing in both North and South. “Atypical” (temporary) formal employment, informal employment, and outright unemployment are, collectively, increasing faster than permanent, formal jobs. In South Africa, for example, part-time work has increased by 31% between 1998 and 2001; in the same period, full-time work has fallen by 8%. Much of the “new” working class therefore is essentially a “reserve army” of labor, consisting of those especially vulnerable workers and unemployed who employers can use to undermine the unionized workforce.

Rather than imply the “end of the working class,” the reality on the ground presents the world’s labor movements with new challenges: to bring into its ranks the

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growing “new” working class, until now generally excluded from union activities, and to find new ways of promoting working-class solidarity.

Connecting “Different” Struggles: The Case of South Africa

The old South African economy was built on apartheid, and the South African labor movement cut its teeth in the struggle against apartheid. Connecting “worker” and “community” struggles became its strength, and progressive trade unions associated the fight against social oppression with the fight against capitalism. Union strategy was founded on:

- *Building a political alliance for socio-economic transformation* – A few years before the 1994 democratic elections, COSATU forged a “Tripartite Alliance” with the Communist Party and the African National Congress (ANC) to introduce democracy and transform the South African economy. This Alliance was based on a common Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), emphasizing growth through redistribution.
- *Forcing the government and capital to negotiate with labor* – Through mass mobilization COSATU stopped the apartheid government from unilaterally restructuring the economy on the eve of democracy. The apartheid regime had sought to fully privatize key state institutions and deregulate important aspects of the economy, thus robbing future democratic governments of crucial economic power. In the face of this mass mobilization, there was an agreement that government’s socio-economic policies had to be negotiated with labor and business groups. After democracy, this arrangement was formalized in the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), where proposed labor legislation and new economic policies had to be presented to representatives of labor and business before being sent to parliament.
- *Promoting militant labor struggles and joint worker-community mobilizations* – Trade unions defied apartheid laws such as those outlawing black unions and pressured employers to do the same, or face mass mobilizations and strikes. Mass mobilizations included national stayaways, general strikes, and “community boycotts” of recalcitrant employers. COSATU has called general strikes and national mass mobilizations several times since the 1994 democratic elections – including actions focused on constitutional negotiations (particularly ensuring the inclusion of the right to strike), on negotiations of the new national labor laws, and on the massive wave of layoffs in recent years. These actions targeted both employers (public and private) and elements of the government.

A Post-Apartheid Balance Sheet

It is said that there are no final victories or defeats, only advances and setbacks. There have been a few key points of advance and setback for the South African labor movement since 1994.

Two key advances have been the introduction of the South African Constitution and the survival, against considerable odds, of NEDLAC, the socio-economic council.

The South African Constitution of 1996 dismantled the legal pillars of apartheid. The Constitution is among the world's most progressive, incorporating a strong bill of rights including socio-economic issues (such as the right to adequate health care) and imposing an obligation on the government to provide certain basic services. The progressiveness of the Constitution owes much to labor-driven social-movement pressure.

NEDLAC has not been popular with either advocates of neoliberalism or the far left. On one hand, neoliberals argue that globalization requires rapid and unpopular decisions that consultative processes cannot generate. This view holds that experts, shielded from political pressures, are most capable of formulating effective policy. On the other hand, many on the left often confuse national negotiations and social dialogues with government and employers with "social partnership" arrangements.

In reality, the South African labor movement approaches NEDLAC as one of many "sites of struggle," and not as an alternative to workplace and industrial struggles. NEDLAC has created an important space for the labor movement to contest the neoliberal program. In particular, the NEDLAC process has blocked neoliberal attempts to dismantle hard-fought labor laws. It has also offered opportunities for increased unity between labor and community sectors represented on the council. Nonetheless, the left is correct to maintain a healthy wariness. All national tripartite negotiations and consultation processes carry with them inherent risks of both defeat and co-optation.

There have, meanwhile, been two major areas of setback for the labor movement. The first has been the growth of income inequality and joblessness. South Africa's post-democracy class formation reflects a gradual transition from race-based inequality towards class-based inequality. The growth of a black elite has made the richest 20% of the population more racially diverse. The incomes of the poorest 40% of the population, however, have fallen by 20%, primarily due to the massive job losses brought about by industrial and workplace restructuring. The lack of progress

in reducing unemployment, poverty, and inequality has been the most serious setback for labor.

The second setback concerns the incomplete and often contradictory implementation of the economic agenda set out in the RDP. While the government is constitutionally compelled to gradually improve people's living standards and access to services, under global market pressures it has liberalized the economy, introduced fiscal constraints, and tried to push social (and labor) concerns down the list of national priorities. This "global market" orientation is like a self-imposed structural adjustment program (SAP), based on the weak notion that "inefficient" state expenditure "crowds out" much-needed "efficient" private sector investment. While more and more people are now recognizing – after seven years of democracy – the fallacies in this argument, the standard arguments against an alternative approach still remain: redistributive policies will allegedly cause an exodus of the wealthy, undermine domestic and international investment, etc.

Social-Movement Unionism

There are promising signs, however, that the labor movement is beginning to build an effective response to these challenges. One key development is a strong and expanding social movement, going beyond traditional trade unions, against neoliberal globalization.

As part of its search for more powerful methods of struggle, COSATU set up the so-called September Commission in 1996 to consider strategy for labor into the 21st century. The commission recommended, essentially, that South African labor tackle its current problems by building on the country's history of social-movement unionism. Its report defined "social unionism" as

“... concerned with broad social and political issues, as well as the immediate concerns of its members. It aims to be a social force for transformation. Its goal is democracy and socialism. Its influence on society is based on its organised power, its capacity to mobilise, its socio-economic programme and policies and its participation in political and social alliances.”

Today social-movement unionism is beginning to deliver the goods. Social-movement union campaigns in South Africa include:

- “*The People's Budget*”– Despite a constitutional requirement that Parliament have the power to change the national budget, five years later there is still no law giving legislators this power. Further, the constitutional obligations on the state to deliver on socio-economic rights create a focus on the national

budget. In response, COSATU, the National NGO Coalition, and several religious organizations began a “People’s Budget” campaign in 2000 – both to increase the budgetary commitment to social goods and quality jobs and to ensure that the budget process is more open and participatory. Many of these NGOs, now mobilizing around the strength of unions, are worker-advice offices addressing the needs of “atypical” and non-unionized workers. Partially as a result of this growing pressure, the government is expected to announce in the next few months a new social security system addressing the country’s poverty and inequality.

- “*Crush poverty, create quality jobs*” – In May 2000, four million workers went on a one-day general strike as part of an ongoing campaign to put unemployment and the massive wave of layoffs on the national agenda. A few months earlier, COSATU organized a civil-society conference on the unemployment crisis, where a broad social coalition (similar to the one uniting around “The People’s Budget”) endorsed the campaign. The conference helped galvanize a national debate about layoffs and job creation – and to mobilize a wide range of civil-society supporters for the labor-movement position.
- “*People before profits*” – Perhaps the best known recent social-movement victory came in April 2001 over thirty-nine of the world’s largest pharmaceutical multinationals. These MNCs took the South African government to court to stop it from making less-expensive HIV/AIDS medicines available to poor people. COSATU and AIDS NGOs, as part of a wider social movement, created a massive local and international campaign against these MNCs under the banner of “putting people before profits.” Eventually even CNN was carrying footage showing banners saying, “Capitalism is a sick system!” Under growing pressure key MNCs withdrew, scuttling the lawsuit.

Besides achieving their own specific advances, all the campaigns have helped strengthen the voice of labor in the national debate. These campaigns have also allowed other social formations to increase their own “voice.”

Though social-movement unionism campaigns are becoming a regular feature of today’s South Africa, the definition of social-movement unionism remains a subject of debate. Crucially, however, social-movement unionism is an “orientation” rather than a fixed set of structures or goals. Historically, South African unions have placed themselves at the center of the country’s social-change movements, but the nature of these movements has varied over time. The social-movement unionism of the 1980s was more socio-political (anti-apartheid focused), including even black business

groups, whereas the social-movement unionism of today is more socio-economic (job and poverty focused), with support from the white working class.

Nonetheless, the popular demands put forward by social-movement unionism are linked by the common threads of class analysis and participatory governance. The trade unions can serve as “political schools” where workers become more conscious of how the economy’s underlying patterns of ownership and control affect their everyday lives. Through a social-movement platform, unions effectively reach more people – increasing public awareness of what capitalism is doing to them.

Social-movement unionism creates space for the marginalized section of the working class currently reached only by NGOs and community-based organisations. Social-movement unionism can help the labor movement mobilize more of the so-called “atypical” and hard-to-unionize working class. This offers the strongest possible answer to the neoliberal jibe that unions merely represent a “labor elite.”

While social-movement unionism has many strengths, it represents only a beginning in the struggle for alternatives to neoliberalism. Despite the recent advances, the South African labor movement is still hard pressed to hold its ground. Social-movement unionism could, however, lead to a broader and deeper challenge to capitalism over the long run. Indeed, rather than bidding farewell to the working class, we may be witnessing its resurgence.

Resources: September Commission, Sixth National COSATU Congress, 1997; Andre Gorz, Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism, Pluto Press, 1982; Kim Moody, Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy, Verso, 1997.