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## **TRADE UNION REVITALISATION AND THE PROSPECTS OF AN ECOSOCIALIST WORKING CLASS POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The 2014 national elections once again saw the ruling African National Congress (ANC) returned with a handsome majority of 62 per cent of votes cast. For the ANC and its allies the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) this re-affirms the overwhelming popularity of the national liberation movement, and endorses its current leader, Jacob Zuma. The ANC, they assert, can now move ahead with bolder, more 'radical' socioeconomic policies. Those who criticise the ruling alliance from the left are, in their eyes, 'pretenders' and 'charlatans'; either 'adventurist populists', 'narrow ultra-left workerists' or 'syndicalists'. For ANC/SACP supporters, the party of Mandela, despite its challenges of incumbency, remains the only true voice of the left.

This conviction has been roundly challenged. Critics point out that in fact most people did *not* vote ANC during the last elections. Indeed, if the total eligible votes of 31.4 million are counted, the ANC only received a mandate from 11.4 million (or 36.4 per cent) of the electorate.<sup>1</sup> Most either did not register to vote, or registered but failed to pitch up at the polling booth. This indicates a high degree of alienation among voters, in a context of increasing levels of local 'service delivery' protests and industrial action.

A key factor that has spurred on this alienation is rising social inequality, with a new black elite joining the ranks of the established white elite, whereas the working poor and unemployed struggle to make ends meet. It is this that provoked mineworkers in the platinum sector to go on strike in 2012, demanding a living wage – which tragically ended in the police massacre of thirty-four mineworkers at Marikana. Not since 1922<sup>2</sup> had police in South Africa fired on striking workers, and the bloodbath

shook South Africans to the core. Many left the ANC as a result, including such stalwarts as Ronnie Kasrils (Pillay 2013).

Increasing corruption compounds the problem of alienation from the ruling party, with a president overtly engaging in dubious practices, such as spending around R240m on security upgrades at his rural Nkandla residence. Reports of severe corruption in all spheres of government and the public service since Zuma became president are now daily news. These factors, as well as the government's inability, despite radical rhetoric, to move out of a conservative macroeconomic path beholden to the minerals-energy-financial complex, has given rise to two potentially seismic events.

First is the creation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which won 1.17 million (or 6.35 per cent) of the votes in the 2014 national elections. Ostensibly a leftwing party (some critics, such as Baccus (2013), have labelled them rightwing populist), they have, since assuming their seats in Parliament, caused a stir by accusing the ANC government of massacring the Marikana mineworkers, calling for President Jacob Zuma to pay the money used to rebuild his Inkandla homestead, and demanding the nationalisation of mines and radical land redistribution (see Nieftagodien in this volume).

Second is the momentous decision taken by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) in December 2013, to leave the Alliance and work towards setting up a United Front of progressive organisations, as well as a movement for socialism. The 'Numsa moment' can be seen as a return to the 'workerist' (or 'social movement union') roots of Numsa, where in the 1980s as the Metal and Allied Workers Union (Mawu) it led the argument for an independent but politically engaged labour movement uncontaminated by the nationalist politics of the liberation movements (Forrest 2011).

Numsa, however, has not only been innovative and bold with regard to its political stance. It has also in recent years spearheaded the labour movement's belated but path-breaking focus on climate change, alternative energy and green jobs. This has the potential of moving the union out of its traditional concentration on workplace bargaining issues, and towards a broader focus on arguably *the* major issue facing capitalism: the natural limits to growth.

It seems, therefore, appropriate to speak of *two* Numsa moments, its ecological moment and its political moment. However, is the union leadership's intentions to

form a 'Marxist-Leninist' political party a regressive move, which could sidetrack the radical thrust promised by these moments? Or is there a real possibility that the first ecological moment within Numsa could be a stepping stone towards a broader, and more radical, 'eco-socialist politics' within the United Front?

To assess the current conjuncture, it is necessary to first briefly delve into history.

### **THE RISE AND DECLINE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT UNIONISM**

The strategic compromise between the shop floor unions and the United Democratic Front (UDF) -aligned community or political unions, forged during the critical 1985-87 period, was a major breakthrough for workers' unity. However, it arguably also undermined the initial radical vision of democratic workers' control of the union as well as society (as expressed by activist academic Rick Turner in his highly influential *The Eye of the Needle* (1972)). (See also Keniston 2010.) This 'popular-democratic' synthesis (Saul, 1986) connected production politics and broader community-state power politics (Burawoy 1985), and was meant to avoid the debilitating effects of two types of what was labelled 'workerism': namely a narrow 'economism' (an exclusive focus on the workplace to the exclusion of the broader working class in other spheres of struggle) or a narrow 'syndicalism' (where trade unions act as political vehicles, but to the near exclusion of community or political organisations). At the same time, the debilitating effects of what was called 'populism' (an over-emphasis on broader state-power, nationalist, struggles to the neglect of shop-floor organisation) were limited by the unions' insistence on their independence from political actors, and the prioritisation of working class issues – principles that became the cornerstone of Cosatu. This combination, in theory, envisaged the working class leading the struggle for state power – a form of anti-systemic social movement unionism (Pillay 2013b). In reality it was not so simple.

Since 1990, when the ANC and SACP were unbanned and became the dominant political forces in the country, and Cosatu officially became part of the Tripartite Alliance, the federation found itself caught between a robust social movement unionism and a tamer political unionism (Pillay 2011). Although increasing inequality and unemployment ensured that workers agitated for a greater share in the spoils of democracy, Cosatu at the same time subordinated itself to the ruling party, particularly

during election periods, and became enmeshed in institutionalised forums of corporatist decision making at industry, regional and national levels. In a context of comparatively high but still modest union density of approximately 30 per cent (as opposed to up to 80 per cent in Sweden, the model of successful corporatism) participation in the ruling party and forums brought some benefits, but turned attention away from building the union movement.

Cosatu itself recognised these dangers and over the past decade continuously resolved to recruit more members – formal and informal workers – as well as to rebuild its relationship with other organisations fighting broader working-class issues. It has thus far fallen far short of its target of four million members by 2015 – current membership stands at about two million, with hardly any inroads into the organisation of informal or ‘precarious’ workers. While it has at times reached out to other sections of society – for example its campaigns with the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) against HIV/AIDs, the now-moribund basic income grant campaign, and against the e-tolling of highways – these have been constrained by its alliance with the ruling party, as well as other objective constraints (see Paret in this volume). Its strikes over wage demands have been inwardly focussed and rarely elicited support from communities. The Marikana tragedy revealed the social distance between union leaders and members, as mineworkers rejected the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) for neglecting their interests and broke away to form the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (Amcu).

Under Zwelinzima Vavi’s leadership, the federation did try to address these issues through more concerted attempts to reach out to precarious workers, broaden the federation’s understanding of environmental issues and food security, and lay the basis for a return to a more robust social movement unionism. At the same time, Vavi and affiliates such as Numsa have been highly critical of government’s continued adherence to a neoliberal economic framework (as well as threats to civil liberties and increased corruption) even as it talks about the need for planning, an efficient developmental state and green economic development. This critical stance, however, is not the script drawn up by the SACP, which warned Vavi and Numsa about departing from the national democratic revolution, and making unreasonable ‘socialist’ demands on government (Pillay 2011; SACP 2013a).

What follows is a discussion of different, interrelated sites of contestation which have produced these new moments: firstly around the meaning of economic transformation (as expressed through the debate on the National Development Plan (NDP), the green economy and nationalisation) and secondly around the political organisation of working-class counter-hegemony (as expressed through the debate about Cosatu's suspension of its general secretary, Vavi) giving rise to new possibilities of left revitalisation outside the Alliance.

### **CONTESTING THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (NDP)**

After the ANC's adoption of the NDP at its Mangaung conference in December 2012, Numsa re-ignited its criticism of the NDP's economic policy proposals. It argued that the plan reinforced the neoliberal 'fundamentals' of the previous Growth, Employment and Redistribution (Gear) macroeconomic policy – the criticism of which, as the '1996 class project', was ironically the glue that bound the coalition of forces that brought Zuma to power in 2007 (Pillay 2011). Much of Numsa's critique became the basis of Cosatu's critique (Numsa 2013c; Coleman, 2013).

The SACP, after initially going along with the NDP at Mangaung, felt obliged to respond and produced a detailed assessment drawn up by its deputy general secretary, Jeremy Cronin. The party has been under severe pressure since 2009 for seeming to abandon a relatively critical working-class perspective in exchange for being in government. The party defends itself by arguing that they are following a responsible course of action by getting into government and working with the Zuma leadership to radicalise the national democratic revolution – to give substance to a 'second phase' of deeper transformation. In this sense workers' control derives from the centre, where the vanguard of the working class, the SACP, furthers working-class interests within government (where, inevitably, compromises are made in the interests of longer-term influence). Since the ascension of Zuma the SACP occupies a number of Cabinet posts, and has leaders at all other levels of government, and in Parliament. This dispersal of party resources has, argue Vavi and Numsa, distracted the SACP to the point of being government praise singers, as opposed to building the party as a true vanguard of working-class interests (Pillay 2011).

While acknowledging that the government's much-heralded NDP – supported *inter alia* by business, the media and the opposition Democratic Alliance – has a number

of flaws, the SACP (2013a) believes that it lays the basis for a shift to greater planning and building a developmental state. The SACP's (2013b) balanced critique of the NDP acknowledged positive aspects of the 500 page document, such as the proposals for improving state capacity, education and spatial development, but agreed with Cosatu that the all-important economics chapter retains the essential features of neoliberalism.

The NDP is a product of the National Planning Commission, which includes experts from a wide range of disciplines, and was initially chaired by the former minister of Finance under Mbeki, Trevor Manuel, and co-chaired by the now deputy president of the ANC, Cyril Ramaphosa. For a while it seemed that the more developmentalist New Growth Path (NGP), crafted by former unionist Ebrahim Patel's Department of Economic Development, along with the second Industrial Policy Action Plan (IPAP2), drawn up by the Department of Trade and Industry, would become the overarching policy perspective of government. However, since 2012 – ironically after the Marikana tragedy and the wave of strikes that gripped the country that year – the balance of forces within government tipped back in the favour of Treasury and the mineral-energy-complex (MEC). The NDP, which hardly acknowledged the existence of the NGP and IPAP2, was now favoured, thus re-establishing the hegemony of neoliberalism and the MEC. As Cosatu's Neil Coleman argued, it made no attempt to address social inequality or the creation of meaningful jobs, other than poorly paid jobs in the informal sector (Coleman 2013).

The NDP is a classic example of the 'art of paradigm maintenance' as perfected by bodies such as the World Bank (Wade 1995). The commission drew in a wide range of credible people to give it legitimacy, and while some proposals are indeed worthwhile they are all embedded in a neoliberal green economy perspective that maintains the essentials of the *status quo*. For example, proposals for climate change and the green economy start off impressively in the NDP with a deep analysis of the problem in keeping up current levels of knowledge within the environmental movement, and the problems of inaction. However, this impressive insight is effectively washed away by the imperatives of growth and business-as-usual within the confines of the MEC (Rudin 2013).<sup>3</sup>

Paradigm maintenance involves ideological sleights of hand and processes that deflect criticism to committees that either never meet or meet with little consequence. As such, Cosatu's misgivings around the economics chapter, expressed at a special

Alliance meeting in August 2013 to resolve the impasse (which Numsa did not attend) were deftly consigned to a special committee which was in no hurry to meet – allowing the ANC to position the NDP as its policy platform in the run-up to the 2014 elections, with endorsement from its Alliance partners (*The New Age* 13 January 2014). They are still to meet at the time of writing (June 2015).

While neither Cosatu nor Numsa focussed on the climate change aspects of the NDP, Numsa has been at the forefront of developing counter-proposals on the green economy. This is the beginning of a new direction in thinking for the labour movement, as it increasingly sees the crisis of capitalism as a social as well as an ecological crisis.

### **NUMSA'S FIRST MOMENT**

A range of civil society organisations, including some trade unions, came together in 2011 to form the Climate Jobs Campaign, to address the fear that the transition to 'green jobs' will be market driven. Research findings have indicated that jobs in renewable energy sectors, including the building of wind, wave tide and solar power, the renovation and insulation of homes and offices, and the provision of public transport, could create 3.7 million decent jobs based on the principles of ecological sustainability, social justice and state intervention. The campaign has since been focused around the demand for One Million Climate Jobs, as an achievable first step towards a just transition to fight unemployment and climate change. Research conducted for the campaign has shown how resources can be diverted towards 'decent, people- and publicly-driven jobs that reduce the causes and impacts of climate change' (One Million Climate Jobs Campaign 2013: 13).

There is a growing movement showing how shifted priorities and political will can generate the ideas and resources necessary to create meaningful alternatives. While Numsa is to some extent involved with this campaign, it has yet fully to take root within the labour movement itself, which may have to do with Cosatu's continued embeddedness in the Tripartite Alliance. As noted above, organised labour has kept its distance from NGOs and social movements that have a transformative agenda and are critical of the ANC.

Nevertheless, the labour movement has in recent years begun to take environmental issues more seriously. In 2013 Cosatu published a policy paper on the environment, which raises critical issues regarding a just transition from the current

economic paradigm to that of a low carbon economy. However, as Jacky Cock (2013) points out, Cosatu is caught between a *reformist* position – as exemplified by the NUM and environmental NGOs such as the World Wildlife Fund – which seeks accommodation within the logic of green capitalism, market based solutions such as carbon trading, and technologies such as carbon capture and storage, and a *transformative* position, exemplified by its now expelled affiliate Numsa and NGOs such as Earthlife Africa and Groundwork which stress the need for a class analysis and the recognition that the capitalist system is at the heart of the crisis of climate change. Despite these differences within Cosatu, however, the federation’s 2011 climate change policy framework identifies capitalism as the problem, and rejects market mechanisms to reduce carbon emissions. However, to date Numsa is the only union that has taken climate change and renewable energy seriously and come up with clear proposals towards a low carbon future.

The government’s market-based proposals around renewable energy give private companies (independent power producers) the lead in providing alternatives such as ‘onshore wind, concentrated solar thermal, solar photovoltaic, biomass, biomass, landfill gas and small hydro’ (Numsa 2012: 1). Numsa’s ‘socially owned’ alternative involves:

- public, community and collective ownership of land sites which can produce renewable energy;
- social ownership of utilities that generate, transmit and distribute energy;
- social ownership and control of the fossil fuel industry such as coal and synthetic fuel to harness their revenues and fund renewable alternatives;
- local content requirements in the building of a renewable energy manufacturing base, in order to create local jobs;
- the creation of municipal solar and wind parks;
- the use of workers’ pension funds to finance socially-owned renewable companies;
- the promotion of gender equity at all levels of the occupational ladder in such companies; and
- the setting up of a network, in collaboration with local and international friends of Numsa, to monitor the bidding process around government tenders for the provision of renewable energy (Numsa 2012).



In these proposals Numsa makes an implicit distinction between *social* ownership, which involves maximum democratic participation from below (by workers and citizens), and *state* ownership, which is bureaucratic control over public resources, increasingly within a framework of market principles where workers are exploited and domestic consumers fleeced in the interests of large corporations – as is the case of the state-owned power utility Eskom, and the Central Energy Fund (CEF). Numsa’s proposals give substance to its more general views on nationalisation where, in contrast to the state-controlled ‘nationalisation’ of the EFF (2013), it calls for *worker-controlled* nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy. In its secretariat report to the December special congress it states: ‘We know that nationalisation by itself is not necessarily in the interests of the working class ... So, whilst Numsa’s position is a clear class position, the position of the EFF is not ... The EFF is explicitly anti-capitalist but it is not socialist ... it does not clarify what kind of society it is struggling for’ (Numsa 2013d:23).

While Numsa has declared itself to be ‘socialist’, it is itself only beginning to flesh out what that may mean in concrete terms. A ‘socially owned’ and ‘worker controlled’ orientation seems more in accordance with a bottom-up eco-socialist (or eco-Marxist) approach<sup>4</sup> which Numsa does not yet explicitly embrace, as opposed to the union’s ‘Marxist-Leninist’ discourse that is normally (but not necessarily) associated with bureaucratic statism. The latter remains the orientation of many of its top leaders, including the general secretary and his key advisers.

Nevertheless, Numsa’s emerging alternative vision means that, as before, it has taken the lead in a development of policies within the union movement. Since its 2013 decision to leave the Alliance, and its expulsion from Cosatu in November 2014, the union has been preoccupied with its political re-alignment (as well as expanding its membership). Its innovative programme on climate change and renewable energy has consequently taken a back seat (but could be revived once its future trajectory is clarified).

## **NUMSA’S SECOND MOMENT**

The breakdown of relationships within the Tripartite Alliance has been simmering for some years (see Pillay 2011) and has now spilled over into Cosatu itself, with Numsa (2013a and c) accusing the SACP of being at the forefront of divisions within the

working class. In one corner is a dominant SACP-aligned group of affiliates led by Cosatu president S'dumo Dlamini, and supported *inter alia* by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) and the SA Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) offering relatively uncritical support to the Zuma-led ANC, while on the other is the more independent grouping led by ousted Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi, and supported by Numsa and eight other affiliates.<sup>5</sup>

Vavi was suspended by the Cosatu central committee (composed of the top officials of each affiliate) in August 2013, after he admitted having sex in the Cosatu offices with a subordinate he had previously hired. This followed a previous attempt by his detractors to have him investigated for malpractices regarding the purchasing of the new head office building. Vavi's woes began during the run-up to the September 2012 Cosatu congress, when there was a concerted attempt by the SACP faction to oppose his re-election as general secretary. When it became clear (from the applause of delegates) that Vavi had overwhelming support amongst ordinary members of the federation (but not amongst the affiliates' office bearers) a deal was struck whereby none of the top positions was contested. In exchange it was decided to support Jacob Zuma's re-election as ANC president a few months later (Pillay 2013a). However, Vavi's continued outspoken criticism of government policy and corruption kept him in the sights of his detractors, leading to his eventual suspension. In January 2014 he was finally charged with bringing the federation into disrepute, and was meant to appear before a disciplinary committee (Marrian 2014). However, a court order reinstated him as general secretary in April 2014. The ANC also intervened before the May national elections to try and broker a peace deal between the contending groups.<sup>6</sup> Vavi was eventually expelled in March 2015.

Prior to his reinstatement, Numsa and other affiliates<sup>7</sup> demanded a special congress of Cosatu to discuss the suspension. For them this was a question of workers' control – such a suspension was clearly a political vendetta, and ought not to be decided by a few officials at a central committee meeting. Worker delegates should have an opportunity to debate the matter (Numsa 2013a). However, for former unionist and ANC general secretary Gwede Mantashe the Vavi affair proved the opposite – that over-reliance on individuals, in particular officials like general secretaries, violated the principles of workers' control. In an address to the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union

(Popcru) at the time of the suspension, Mantashe reminded delegates of the long-held Cosatu principle that elected worker leaders such as the union president should hold more power than general secretaries, who are paid officials. Instead, the affiliates allowed the opposite to happen, leading to too much power being vested in individuals such as Vavi (*Business Day* 21 August 2013).

As Numsa (2013a) subsequently pointed out, Mantashe was being disingenuous. While in the beginning many general secretaries of the re-emerging shop-floor unions were (usually white) intellectuals and full-time officials who often did not have a vote in meetings, the office bearers were workers who in principal controlled the unions, but in a part-time capacity (Friedman 1987). Indeed, it was Mantashe's own former union, the NUM, which led the way with full-time paid office bearers, which is now the norm. Today, all the top positions are elected at union congresses, so the distinction no longer applies. What Mantashe was doing, as ANC general secretary and a former SACP chairperson, was legitimising the marginalisation of Vavi, and promoting the profile of Cosatu president Sdumo Dlamini, in line with the political interests of the ANC and SACP. As the 2014 national elections approached, however, Mantashe backtracked, and urged an amicable settlement on the Vavi matter in the interests of worker unity – the ANC needed the support of a united Cosatu during the election campaign. But his overtures were rebuffed by the anti-Vavi faction. Critics believe that the fingerprints of SACP general secretary Blade Nzimande, an avid supporter of Zuma, were all over this affair.

While the initial allegations against Vavi concerning the purchase of Cosatu House were greeted with suspicion by his supporters, the subsequent charges of sexual misconduct lost him much sympathy, despite his public apology. Gender activists in particular were incensed that, once again, a man had abused his position of authority over women. Although this is a common occurrence in the unions, including amongst Vavi's accusers, he was expected to live by a higher standard. In addition, he gave his detractors a loaded gun with which to shoot him, thus undermining his ability to continue to lead Cosatu in a progressive direction. Instead, the federation was for a while captured by the conservative SACP faction which blocked any moves to convene a special congress, leaving Vavi suspended until the court order reinstated him.

In the midst of this battle, Numsa took the bold move to break away from the ANC and SACP at its December 2013 special congress, and continued to support Vavi

within the federation. The union also decided to broaden its scope of operation, bringing it into increased conflict with other affiliates such as the NUM (Paton 2013a). While Numsa resolved not to leave Cosatu, but instead campaign to win over the federation to its positions by the time it convenes its next congress in 2015, the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of Cosatu eventually voted to expel its largest affiliate in November 2014 (which Numsa is challenging in court). The dominant faction in Cosatu ignored the overwhelming support amongst Numsa's delegates at the 2013 congress for their resolutions, after a few months of extensive debate and deliberations in the regions (Paton 2013b). Prior to the special congress the SACP (2013a+b; Nicholson 2013) tried to sow seeds of division within Numsa, calling on delegates to reject proposals to leave the Alliance, but came out empty-handed. Numsa in turn was hoping that the departure of key SACP leaders in affiliates like Nehawu and Sadtu, to become ANC MPs after the April 2014 elections, would open up space within these unions for a more progressive politics.<sup>8</sup> This however did not materialise.

Numsa started 2014 determined to begin implementing its resolutions, and pave the way for a united front of opposition forces and a movement for socialism. It held its week-long second political school for shop stewards, with invited guests from other affiliates, and engagement with a variety of civil society organisations (Ngobese 2014). This was followed by other political schools, where future socialist options were explored. The intention was to develop a critical Marxist perspective within the union, and give shop stewards the ability to engage in discussions around the shape and content of a united front of organisations, and a new socialist formation. A preparatory assembly for the United Front was held in December 2014, including a wide range of union and community activists, and while the union remains central to its work, it has also developed a degree of autonomy.

In April 2015, after a socialist conference attended by a range of very small socialist groupings, Numsa's general secretary Irvin Jim announced the union's to form a 'Marxist-Leninist' political party - the exact form of which is yet to be specified (Jim promised extensive consultations within the union, and with the United Front). This is a highly contested issue within Numsa, and within the United Front which has a more open and inclusive process of organisation building - in contrast to the top-down vanguardist politics associated with 'Marxist-Leninist' parties (see later). Indeed, for some within the United Front the prospects of a true left revitalisation, centred on a

renewed social movement unionism and a participatory-democratic political alternative, may be severely jeopardised amidst fears that those associated with it have been sidelined within Numsa.<sup>9</sup>

### **THE PROSPECTS FOR LEFT REVITALISATION**

The ANC's expulsion in 2012 of Youth League leader Julius Malema, whose radical rhetoric on nationalisation and land expropriation caused jitters in the investor community, gave birth to the militant Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, which has drawn support among sections of the poor, including within the Marikana community where mineworkers were killed by police in August 2012. The EFF is now the third largest party in the national parliament, and has a significant presence in many provinces, including the industrial heartland of Gauteng.

The Workers and Socialist Party (Wasp), which also has a presence among Marikana workers, was formed in 2013 by the the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM), and contested the 2014 elections but lost its deposit. Wasp's public profile increased during the latter half of 2013 when Gwede Mantashe blamed 'foreign agents' for the troubles at Marikana – referring in particular to Liv Shange, a Swedish national now married to a South African, who plays a key role in Wasp. She featured prominently in the news when the state seemed poised to deny her re-entry into the country with her South African children after a holiday abroad. After a public campaign she was allowed back in (Wasp, 2013a). In mid-2014 accusations of 'foreign agent' were repeated by Mantashe – this raised the public profile of the party, which it could not capitalise on due to its scant resources, and inability to penetrate the workers' movement in Marikana and elsewhere. Numsa's first general secretary Moses Mayekiso was made president of Wasp before the 2014 elections<sup>10</sup>, and Wasp hopes to play a key role in the formation of Numsa's Marxist-Leninist party.

All these formations, from the SACP on the centre left to Wasp on the far left, invoke the spirits of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin in support of their cause. Indeed, leading members of most of these groups were in the past within the fold of the ANC and SACP, and many still owe allegiance to the heroes of the liberation movement such as the former ANC president Oliver Tambo, and SACP leaders Chris Hani and Joe Slovo. While the EFF cannot match the presence of the SACP and Numsa within the organised

working class, its public profile since its election to Parliament has increased significantly, winning it more sympathisers.

For many on the independent left, the sharpening of differences within the Alliance is a hopeful sign that at last the scales are falling from the eyes of large sections of the working class, as they see that the ANC/SACP emperor has no clothes. However, it remains unclear whether an alternative formation is a broad United Front, or an independent working-class party that has its roots in the labour movement. Many Vavi supporters within Cosatu, however, remain cautious towards these new formations, feeling as they do the heat of SACP supporters within their ranks. Any hint at this stage that the critical voice within Cosatu is linked to outside groupings strengthens the view within the SACP faction that at worst an 'anti-majoritarian' liberalism, supported by imperialism, is at work here (under the guise of left politics), or at best misguided 'ultra-leftists' or 'syndicalists' are leading workers astray with adventurist politics (see for example SACP 2013c; Nicholson 2013; Nehawu 2014).

In other words, there is a revival of the debate of the 1980s between the left in Fosatu, who favoured an independent union-led political strategy either directly through unions or through or a working class party, and the SACP-aligned left within the UDF, which sought working class hegemony through the Tripartite Alliance led by the ANC. The leading affiliate in Fosatu back then was Mawu, which became the core of Numsa by the time of Cosatu's launch in 1985. As argued above, a key difference between then and now is that the left in Mawu had a more diverse intellectual lineage, drawing inspiration from, among others, Rick Turner and Antonio Gramsci (Forrest 2011).

Today, the dominant left paradigm across Cosatu is that of 'Marxist-Leninism' – at least at the level of ideological discourse. This is an indication of the SACP's success in immersing itself in the union movement since its unbanning in 1990. The party positioned itself as the key intellectual reference point, such that today no one in Cosatu, on either side of the divide, deviates from the 'Marxist-Leninist' discourse framework derived from the SACP – even if the actual practice of the SACP and Cosatu is more social-democratic and to an extent corporatist. Marxist-Leninism, however understood, has become the hegemonic political discourse within the union movement – and the argument is over who has the *correct* Leninist analysis of the current South

African political economy, often with reference to SACP stalwarts such as Joe Slovo and Chris Hani.

The SACP's Marxist-Leninism, of course, is of the mechanical Stalinist lineage, given that throughout its history the party followed all the twists and turns of the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the publication of Joe Slovo's *Has Socialism Failed* in 1990, the SACP began to shed some of this baggage, although this has re-asserted itself in recent years (Williams 2008). The other Marxist-Leninist heritage, Trotskyism, was tolerated for a time within the SACP during the 1990s and early 2000s, but has since been marginalised. It maintains a presence within the Democratic Left Front, a small coalition of activists, and completely dominates the ideological outlook of Wasp (2013b), which has its roots in the Marxist Workers' Tendency of the ANC (historically aligned to the Militant Tendency in the UK) (see Leggassick 2007). The EFF (2013) has combined a professed allegiance to 'Marxist-Leninism' (derived from the SACP) with the theories of Frantz Fanon as well as the political practice of the assassinated socialist president of Burkino Faso, Thomas Sankara. Its militant black nationalist-socialist orientation is also influenced by the black consciousness leader Steve Biko, given its absorption of the black consciousness group the Left Imbizo (however leading members such as Andile Mngxitama were expelled after the party's December 2014 congress, after claiming that the EFF's leadership had engaged in corrupt practices). There are, of course, a number of other Trotskyist groupings, such as the Workers' Vanguard League, but their presence within the working class is virtually non-existent. All of these currents feed into the discussion within the union movement, and within the Numsa working class party process.

With the exception of the more flexible 'eco-socialist' or 'democratic' Marxism in some quarters (including within Numsa), the dominant discourse and practice within the left remains mired in a narrow vanguardist interpretation of Lenin's notion of democratic-centralist politics. As such these formations resemble old wine in new bottles. As the preceding discussion shows, Numsa has reinvoked the principles of workers' control in various ways, and, despite its 'Marxist-Leninist' discourse, has the potential to revive its participatory democratic ethos and play a significant role in reinvigorating working-class politics in South Africa. Indeed, some may argue that there is no 'Chinese Wall' between a Marxist-Leninist vanguard (as opposed to vanguardist)

approach, and participatory democracy, as the example of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala indicates (Williams 2008).<sup>11</sup>

The future of left revitalisation remains an open project, brimming with radical potential. What follows is a brief discussion of what a 21<sup>st</sup> century eco-socialist alternative vision entails, in contrast to that of 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxist-Leninism.

## ECOSOCIALIST VISIONS

Globally, there is increasing recognition that alternatives, if they are to serve ALL the world's people, and preserve the natural environment for current and future generations to enjoy, must be substantive and go beyond the interests of only the state and the market. A *society* focused development path, such as what is being (or has been) attempted in the Indian state of Kerala, or in countries like Bolivia,<sup>12</sup> attempts to build a participatory political and economic system for people in harmony with nature. Indeed, even the small mountain country of Bhutan has lessons to offer, as it navigates out of its feudal past into a multi-party democracy and the challenge of pursuing Gross National Happiness (GNH) based on balanced development. Its GNH Index offers a deep and extensive methodology to measure development in all its dimensions, and all development plans must first be subject to a GNH audit.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, there are a range of other local economic alternatives being practiced in communities around the world, including co-operatives, community gardens, and socially-owned renewable energy projects, which can be learnt from. The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) also offers alternative conceptions of regional trade, based on co-operation, solidarity and even bartering (where for example Cuba trades doctors for Venezuelan oil), rather than cut-throat competition. While these regimes may not all be fully democratic, they have made significant progress in improving the well-being of subordinate classes compared to other countries in the region.

Arguably the most advanced and democratic of this new wave of Latin American governments offering alternatives is Bolivia. While in recent years the ecological left has been dismayed by what seems to be the retreat into 'neo-extractivism' (see Boron, 2012), the *idea of buen vivir*, and the granting of the earth constitutional rights, remains inspirational (whatever the compromises that have had to be made in practice). Bolivia's indigenous president Evo Morales (2009), who was re-elected in 2014 with another healthy majority, offers this inspiring vision of *buen vivir*:



“For us, what has failed is the model of “living better” (than others), of unlimited development, industrialisation without frontiers, of modernity that deprecates history, of increasing accumulation of goods at the expense of others and nature. For that reason we promote the idea of Living Well, in harmony with other human beings and with our Mother Earth”.

These sentiments have inspired a growing movement within the over-developed countries, around the concept of ‘degrowth’. This builds on the ideas of the French Marxist Andre Gorz, who in the 1970s and 1980s made a forceful argument about the need for reduced working time, if we are to address the problem of unemployment, and reduce unnecessary consumption. The degrowth paradigm that has emerged in recent years, mainly within the over-developed world, explicitly embraces the ‘utopian’ thinking of *buen vivir*, *ubuntu* and Buddhist economics, and some variants also include ecological Marxist thinking. A vast literature has emerged around this new paradigm, and initial criticism that it was too focussed on over-developed countries, with little applicability to developing countries with large unmet needs, has been addressed by conceding that there needs to be growth in the south – but balanced, ecologically sensitive growth that does not ‘carbon copy’ the tragedies of western development trajectories (see D’Alisa et al, 2015).

Struggles against elite dominance usually bring to the fore new visionary leadership that can either break new ground, or become co-opted into the dominant paradigm. To prevent the latter, as Gandhi and later the feminist movement warned, activists must be the change they want to see. Drawing on the thinking of the ancients, this involves personal transformation and continuous introspection, as well as a deep participatory politics, where leaders are always held accountable to their organisations, members and communities.

Given the enormous challenges of ecological destruction and social inequality in the world, a radical, utopian vision is necessary. In order to conceptualise that vision, modern thinkers such as Rick Turner, a radical intellectual activist who inspired the re-emergence of the union movement in SA during the 1970s, made connections between the socialist movements of today, and ancient philosophies that have also grappled with their worlds in crisis, as class divisions, green, violence and dispossession engulfed their societies. The sages of the ancient past envisaged egalitarian social orders based on compassion and kindness towards fellow human beings and the natural world, which is the basis of democratic eco-socialist thinking.

The most advanced thinking of the ancient world was arguably that of the Buddha, who used a dialectical method to arrive at an atheist Humanist worldview – not unlike that of Karl Marx (see Chattopadhyaya,1970). A non-dogmatic, eclectic vision can form the basis of a new ethically grounded social justice movements that cut across

different paradigms and movements, and seeks common ground. If the religious and atheist-humanist movements emphasise *inner* transformation, and the need to change the hearts of people, Marxists emphasise *outer* or structural transformation, and the need to alter the balance of power in society through mass struggle. An over-emphasis on the former can lead to paralysis, and a retreat into individual salvation. An over-emphasis on the latter has led to brutal regimes coming to power, and replicating the violence and alienation of the orders they overthrew. A *combination* of two, however, is a much more radical project, one that digs deep into ourselves, and into our collective powers, for both inner and outer transformation.

As the Bolivian case reminds us, a utopian vision, while necessary, is different to a utopian politics that under-estimates power relations, and the need to navigate choppy waters that involve both struggle and negotiation, and inevitably compromises. A utopian imagination, as Boron (2012) argues, has to be one of real utopias, that seek out the possible, but do not fall victim to possibilism (there is no alternative); that has a utopian vision, but is not blinded by utopianism (living in a dream world). It seeks short term tactical victories that are embedded in longer term strategic visions that can only be guaranteed by a fundamentally democratic project, where power truly resides with the people.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Numsa moments, following the Marikana massacre in 2012, potentially define a new era for the labour movement in South Africa – the assertion of an independent working class politics that questions the productivist growth paradigms that have traditionally been championed by the labour movement, and raises the possibility of more far-reaching eco-socialist alternatives. The United Front initiated by Numsa has drawn together a wide range of counter-hegemonic forces in society, to take these visions forward – even as it recognises that it is not easy for organised labour, rooted among permanent workers or ‘insiders’, to forge meaningful alliances with community groups often composed of informal or unemployed workers.

Nevertheless, it is not impossible. Much depends on how Numsa manages its own internal contestations over the meaning of ‘socialism’ and ‘nationalisation’, and a working class political organisation. Is it just a variant of the Marxist-Leninist heritage of the SACP, steeped in vanguardist (and indeed productivist) politics? Or will it build on Numsa’s impressive work on bottom-up green alternatives and forge an imaginative

eco-socialist path that questions both market power and bureaucratic state power? Indeed, does Numsa have the internal capacity to pursue a broader, more robust social movement unionism (as an independent part of a broader political alliance)? These remain open questions.

In the meantime, Numsa's expulsion from Cosatu in November 2014, is paving the way for a complete re-alignment of forces within the union movement, with moves to establish a new federation out of dissident Cosatu affiliates and other unions<sup>14</sup>. Together with the United Front and/or a working class political party, this could dramatically re-shape the prospects of left revitalisation. Whether this re-vitalisation will be radical, such that it redefines trade unionism, and paves the way for a broader eco-socialist working class politics, remains an open question.

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<sup>1</sup> Figures from the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)

<http://www.elections.org.za/resultsNPE2014/>

<sup>2</sup> The last time workers were shot at during an industrial dispute was in 1922, when the Smuts government went to war with white mineworkers.

<sup>3</sup> According the Department of Environmental Affairs, progress has been made in shifting government priorities towards green issues since 2010, but this is an uphill battle.

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<sup>4</sup> This was initially promoted by the Democratic Left Front (DLF, 2011), a tiny group of activists that has failed to expand its support base into the unions.

<sup>5</sup> These include the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU), South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), South African Catering Commercial and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU), Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), South African State and Allied Workers Union (SASAWU), Communication Workers Union (CWU), South African Football Players Union (SAFPU) and Public and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (PAWUSA).

<sup>6</sup> Report from Alfred Mafuleka to a GLU meeting, 24 July 2014.

<sup>7</sup> On 29 January 2014 the nine affiliates came together and demanded that the special congress be held by March 2014, to chart the way forward, including electing new office bearers. If this demand was not met these affiliates would convene their own special COSATU congress (Joint Press statement, 29 January 2014). Cosatu eventually conceded to a special congress, scheduled for mid-2015, however without the expelled Numsa. This was still being contested at the time of writing (May 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Discussions with NUMSA officials who prefer to remain anonymous.

<sup>9</sup> Discussion with senior members of the United Front preparatory committee in May 2015, who expressed concern about the lack of resources available for the UF process, partly due to Numsa's split energies. Numsa's top leadership seem determined to form a party to contest the 2016 local elections, and is impatient with the slower longer-term vision of the UF, which Numsa's Dinga Sikwebu describes as playing the 'long game'. Sikwebu seems to have been sidelined in the union.

<sup>10</sup> Mayekiso was a hero of Mawu and Numsa during the 1980s, and in the 1990s joined the SACP and ANC, and was involved in controversial business dealings. He subsequently left to join the breakaway Congress of the People (Cope) which had a 'moderate' profile to the right of the ANC. His reputation within Numsa as a result plummeted, but his involvement with Wasp, and Numsa's alienation from the ANC-SACP, may result in his rehabilitation within the union.

<sup>11</sup> In Kerala the Communist Party of India (Marxist) played a pivotal role in instilling bottom-up participatory democracy, with impressive developmental results, particularly in health and education. However this is one current within the CPI(M), and contested by the more vanguardist current that has been dominant in the party elsewhere in India, such as Bengal state, where it lost power recently after ruling for 30 years, and in the process becoming a bureaucratic party mired in corruption and neglect of his working class and peasant base. The Kerala example shows how a 'vanguard' can provide leadership from the centre, and be a catalyst for bottom-up democratic processes; in contrast to the vanguardist approach which pays lip service to genuine participatory democracy, and leads exclusively from the centre.

<sup>12</sup>For more information see Heller, 1999, Williams, 2008 and Bolivia Reborn ([http://cojmc.unl.edu/bolivia/rules\\_toc.html](http://cojmc.unl.edu/bolivia/rules_toc.html)).

<sup>13</sup> Details of the GNH Index can be found at the Centre for Bhutan Studies website at [www. Bhutanstudies.org.bt](http://www.Bhutanstudies.org.bt).

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<sup>14</sup> These include the breakaway from the Amalgamated Mining and Construction Union (Amcu), an NUM breakaway which rose to prominence after Marikana, and subsequently joined the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu), historically a Cosatu rival from the black consciousness/Africanist tradition. Other unions include the more conservative Federation of Unions of SA (Fedusa) and the mainly white rightwing Solidarity union.