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February 4, 2018
GLU Conference Abstract Submission

Abstract

The Crisis of National Liberation Nationalism in South Africa: The Response of the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) and the Role of Worker Education

In the post-apartheid period national liberation nationalism has degenerated. Since 1996 it was neoliberalised and of late has become increasingly authoritarian. While it continues deep globalization, it is linked to massive state level corruption and a new resource nationalism. In popular rhetoric the latter is referred to as 'radical economic transformation'. At the same time, the squeeze on labour has induced greater precarity, high structural unemployment, retrenchments in the context of industrial restructuring and widening income inequality. The Marikana Massacre of platinum mine workers in 2012 was a turning point for the national liberation alliance in South Africa. It has fed into the split of the largest and most militant labour federation in South Africa, COSATU, but has also given rise to the 'NUMSA Moment'. This refers to the decisions taken by the National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA), one the largest unions in South Africa with over 300 000 members, to withdraw from the ANC-led Alliance, withdraw support for the African National Congress in the 2014 elections and work towards building a movement for socialism and workers party. These historic decisions were couched in the language of renewing revolutionary nationalism. This paper explores the understandings of the NUMSA Moment, its political significance, its commitments to alternatives for South Africa and its limits by also drawing on a survey done of leading NUMSA shop stewards and worker leaders involved in a social theory course taught for six years at the University of Witwatersrand. This social theory course continues a tradition of radical worker education in South Africa and had its own consequences for shaping the 'NUMSA Moment' as a conjunctural shift in class politics.