

The South African Elections, Neo-Liberalism and Working Class Strategy

Lucien van der Walt

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The renewed Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) support for the ruling nationalist African National Congress (ANC) has seen the unions dedicate organisers over the last few weeks to ensuring an “overwhelming” ANC victory in the national elections on the 22 April 2009.

How valid is such an approach, and what are the tasks of the working class in the current period?

GEAR WILL STAY

COSATU’s support is on the whole well-intentioned, but (at best) ill-informed, and (at worst) dangerous for the unions. Jacob Zuma, ANC leader, assured the American Chamber of Commerce November last year that “We are proud of the fiscal discipline, sound macroeconomic management and general manner in which the economy has been managed. That calls for continuity”.

In short, the ANC will continue the neo-liberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) policy — the very policy that COSATU has opposed since its inception in 1996. In endorsing Zuma, in short, in campaigning for the ANC (yet again), COSATU is essentially voting for GEAR and the ruling class yet again. When Zuma’s promises prove hollow, as they must, COSATU will be deeply disorientated — at the very time we see the ruling class offensive internationally accelerating.¹

GEAR IS NOT MBEKI

The shift to neo-liberalism in SA was not caused by the rise of the Thabo Mbeki faction to dominance in the ANC after Nelson Mandela stepped down, as COSATU analyses suggest. The notions that Mbeki represented a so-called “1996 class project” (benefiting only black and white capital, and marginalising the unions), and that replacing Mbeki with Zuma (who was part of, then fell foul of, the Mbeki faction) rest on a superficial analysis.

Mandela, Mbeki and Zuma all supported GEAR. Zuma’s ouster as deputy president by Mbeki reflected intra-leadership, intra-ruling class squabbles over the fruits of office. It had nothing to do with issues of principle — or even of corruption. Mbeki used Zuma’s dodgy deals against him, but time and again Mbeki protected equally shady allies *because* they were his allies (the notable example being the ‘gravy plane’ incident where Zuma’s successor [Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka] used a military jet for a family holiday). When the Mbeki faction left the ANC after Zuma’s victory to form COPE, it was not a break between those for and against GEAR, because both still embrace it; it was a squabble for office disguised as a matter of principle.

NEO-LIBERAL EPOCH

Finally, the forces behind GEAR are those of the very system of capitalism and the state under which we live — we live in a phase of the system defined by neo-liberalism.

The causes are deep, profound, and can only be shifted by either an internal collapse of the current arrangement (which nearly happened last year) or by massive class struggles (that make

¹ On GEAR see flag.blackened.net and www.struggle.ws

neo-liberalism unworkable). Neo-liberalism is rooted in a global crisis of over-accumulation in the 1970s, economic globalisation, the exhaustion of state capitalist policies, the changing interests of states — and crucially, massive ideological and organisational defeats of the working class and peasantry since 1968.

It rests on both the particular conditions necessary to the reproduction of state power and capital accumulation in the current epoch, and on a particular balance of class forces.

This helps us to understand why even the apartheid government shifted to neo-liberalism from 1979, privatising (for example) SASOL (1980–1982) and ISCOR (1987–1989). It also highlights the point that GEAR was a *consolidation* of the ANC's neo-liberal shifts, which were already evident before the democratic elections of 1994. The very Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the party's election manifesto of 1994, had a Jekyll-and-Hyde character: commitments to a Keynesian-style stimulus package (mass public works hiring the unemployed, notably) ran alongside World Bank-authored sections (like the land reform proposals) and commitments to neo-liberal dogma (like fiscal austerity).

GLOBAL STORM

The current global storm will reinforce its commitment to this neo-liberal approach. So far, far from signalling any break with neo-liberalism, all the major powers have stayed within the overall neo-liberal framework. There have been, it is true, a few emergency measures which sound like state intervention is on the way back.

Overall, however, the stress is on “continuity” globally. Thus, the main European powers aim to stimulate demand through fiddling with (lowering) interest rates – a typically neo-liberal measure and perfectly typical of the policies of the American Federal Bank over the last 10 years. The basic points of such fiddling are to increase borrowing (boosting spending power without increasing real incomes, to boost demand in a context of under consumption) and promote profiteering through the financial sector as well.

A POST-POLOKWANE ANC?

The ANC's congress at Polokwane — which saw the ouster of Mbeki, and the decisive victory of the Zuma faction — has been hailed by many as profound break with GEAR, and a renewed commitment to a worker-friendly nationalist regime. Much attention has been focussed on resolutions — sponsored by COSATU and its allies — at Polokwane that commit the ANC to ending casual labour. The same commitment appears in the ANC's election manifesto, which states the new government after elections will curb labour brokers, casualisation and regulate outsourcing to prevent “unfair” labour practices.²

The question is really how seriously such promises should be taken. ANC manifestos to the *broad working class* around election time always stress pro-poor, pro-worker measures — and always to great lengths to avoid mentioning the party's longstanding commitment to neo-liberal policies. Certainly GEAR has never appeared in an election manifesto — amazingly enough, the abortive RDP sometimes features.

² See www.politicsweb.co.za

With the party committed for fifteen years to the very policies that centre on promoting casual labour – being itself the author of anti-job security measures like the notorious Section 189 of the Labour Relations Act – it is rather naive to take the ANC’s popular election manifestos too seriously. A glance at the press shows the ANC revealing quite another agenda: while it talks to the masses in the language of “the struggle”, invoking ever more the heroic imagery of the 1980s, it tells business and state bureaucrats nothing will change in the fundamentals. This has been ANC practice since the 1990s. The ANC’s record in office shows which of the two sets of promises – those made to the masses and those to the ruling class – are the real ones. Those made to the ruling class!

Even the election manifesto for public consumption stresses ongoing public-private partnerships (PPPs, i.e. privatisation), the GEAR (and GEAR rollout-agenda ASGISA/ Accelerated Shared Growth Initiative) focus on boosting infrastructure, promoting the manufacturing and finances sectors, and creating jobs through economic growth.³ This is pretty much what Mbeki was doing: liberalise, rationalise, privatise, industrialise, supposedly leading to jobs.

And there should be no surprise, because whatever the ANC might have been before late 1993, it has since then been a ruling class organisation and arm of the state apparatus. It may speak in the language of “the struggle”, but it is not waging any “struggle” other than the struggle to get into office and keep the system going.

As a bourgeois-nationalist party, it combines African nationalism with neo-liberalism in an unstable mix: it is not a workers’ party, even of the most moderate sort, but a ruling class party with working class voters.

NATIONALISM: A MIXED RECORD

I mention the nationalism because it is important: one of the mistakes made by many analysts critical of the post-apartheid situation is to *reduce* the ANC to a neo-liberal party, a sort of African Thatcherism. It is *not* the case. ANC nationalist agendas – like promoting a *black* capitalist class – sometimes involve measures that cut against the grain of strict neo-liberalism – like affirmative procurement policies, affirmative action and designated shares.⁴ The nationalism also helps bind the African working class (particularly) to the ANC: like many other such parties in our region, the ANC retains an appeal *even when* it is neo-liberal, the appeal of the party of liberation.

African nationalism had played a progressive role in the struggle against apartheid in the late 1980s – rejecting terms of that system, it fought for equality before the law and helped galvanise the popular classes in the struggles that led to free elections in 1994. Whatever the limitations of elections, they were a major victory, burying apartheid. In fighting against at least some elements of SA inequity – racism, segregation and so on – the ANC was a progressive force, and infinitely superior to the apartheid regime. Moreover, its policy of ‘non-racialism’ – that “South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black or white” – also enabled a peaceful and progressive – if limited – settlement, rather than a cycle of racial war on the lines of Israel/ Palestine.

We must give credit where it is due. And it is nonsensical to see current SA as “neo-apartheid”: legalised white supremacy is buried, overt white racism is illegal (witness the rapid action against the yobs at Free State University who made a racist video), and the state (accounting for around

³ On ASGISA see www.zabalaza.net

⁴ See www.zabalaza.net

40% of the GDP, and with significant military and legal power) is run largely by Africans, while “black diamonds” like Patrice Motsepe have made it into the ranks of SA’s billionaires. Promotion of a wealthy black elite is official policy, and (in the ANC’s 2009 manifesto), a point of pride: “ANC government policies such as black economic empowerment and affirmative action have contributed to the growth of South Africa’s black middle class by 2.6 million in 2007 ...” This is not “neo-apartheid”, but a partial victory.⁵

Yet African nationalism also had an inherently limiting effect, also noted in 1994, of ignoring the class character of many of the demands of the masses. It posed the struggle primarily as a racial struggle; the struggle against capitalism was never central, yet the masses were often fighting against the impact of capitalism and real material improvements were (and are still) simply not possible without changing the way the economy worked.

It never critiqued the state apparatus, as an expression and institution of ruling class power. African nationalism worshipped at the altar of state power, aiming to capture and use it, as if the state is simply a tool, used however the wielder wishes. Once in power, African nationalism provided new ideological legitimacy for the state, and the ANC a means for the state to capture sections of civil society (its boasted as role as a “a mass based organisation that is rooted amongst the people, reaching into every sector of society and every corner of the land” in the 2009 manifesto), and a willing partner in capitalism.

The power – and now decisively anti-working class character – of this nationalism was shown in the anti-immigrant riots of 2008. That period saw food riots in around 37 countries. The pogroms in SA reflected the same pressure on the working class – falling real incomes – but were turned into vicious immigrant attacks on working class immigrants. Why not against the state?

Like Ba Jin, then, anarchists must see that *in the period of struggle against overt national oppression*, it is a mistake to see “the Nationalist Party” and the reactionary “warlords” as “jackals from the same lair”: the anarchists are not “opposed to the independent war of a semi-colonial country”, but “simply want to go even further” (*Anarchism and the Question of Practice*). But once the nationalists are in power, the position changes, he noted: now the anarchists must be against the nationalist project of a “good government”, and relate to the “revolutionary torrent” of the popular classes as they inevitably go “beyond the aims of the Nationalist Party” through strikes, land occupations and the like.

This sort of understanding – that tactics change according to circumstances, that anarchists can work alongside other forces so long as anarchists stay independent, and that anarchists reject the state as an arena of struggle – is essential. Thus, anarchists can celebrate the achievement of 1994 – parliamentary democracy, ‘non-racialism’, burying apartheid law – and at the same time be opposed to the ANC since then. While COSATU stays wedded to African nationalism, it will remain the plaything of ANC power-brokers, under the illusion that it can “save the soul” of the ANC by intervening in its factional fights.⁶

⁵ Ss noted back in 1994: flag.blackened.net

⁶ www.anarkismo.net

CLASS FORCES

In SA, the local union movement as an active, fighting, force has been on the retreat for the last 10 years — and is unable to fundamentally shift ANC policies. The sudden [ANC] stress on stopping unfair labour practices arises primarily from the need to keep COSATU on side. COSATU's leaders played a vital role in the Zuma camp's victory, and relations with ANC leaders have improved since the Mbeki era. But COSATU remains very much a junior partner, reliant on ANC goodwill. And the balance of forces is simply not such that the ANC has to make any real concessions once back in office, besides saying the right things in speeches.

The ANC election manifesto is raising false hopes. As Barack Obama's record in office in the US has already shown — more troops to Afghanistan, more bail-outs of the rich — elections only rarely change basic state policy. Real changes are almost always driven from below by mass struggle — and that is what is absent, with mass frustration being channelled by COSATU into support for the Zuma faction of the ANC over the last few years.

There is no particular reason to think that the private sector — or the state sector — will move away from the use of casual and contract labour. Both sectors are under immense pressure to cut costs and increase the rate of exploitation — and under relatively little pressure to change. Real change in South Africa's macro-economic policy will depend on serious struggles by the broad working class, rather than on party intrigues and getting supposed “comrades” into central government.

FREE EDUCATION?

Strong hints have also been dropped that education will be reformed post-election. This, in fact, may be possible — mainly because substantial sections of the ruling class realise the education system is in a mess, with a serious skills shortage weakening growth. Moreover, higher education is seen as a key means of generating a “black middle class”. Finally, there have been extremely important struggles in that sector.

If we look at higher education, increased funding has already started (in the latter part of the Mbeki period). This is targeted mostly at disciplines seen as more “relevant” to business and the state, like mathematics and engineering. Yet this runs alongside (and is perfectly in sync with) existing trends in the sector: management centralisation, outsourced services, rising student fees, increasing academic and administration workloads, and increasing pressure to commercialise research and make universities “relevant” to business and the state.

ELECTIONS?

In this context, the position of local left formations like Keep Left to call for a “critical” Zuma vote makes little sense (*'Socialism from Below'*, November 2008). This only means voting for GEAR, the very policy that Keep Left has opposed, and creating illusions in ANC nationalism, which is no longer a progressive force. It is not possible to vote “critically”: for someone or some party: you vote for them, or you don't; there is no fine print on the ballot paper; you vote for Zuma (with or “without illusions”) or you don't.

The justification provided for such support rests basically on the notion that “we” must go to where “the masses” are – and that is assumed to be in the ANC and with Zuma. However, as seen last time around, more people abstained from the elections than voted ANC. Moreover, the last four years have seen nearly 10,000 protests of various sorts – but mainly strikes and service delivery protests.

Certainly there are large layers who are critical of elections, and of the ANC, or at least of ANC policy: why choose the Zuma supporters over these layers and their organisations? Why not see these contradictions as a means to break the nationalist grip on the popular classes? To conflate the masses with the ANC is precisely what the ANC does, but it blinds us on the left to the *real currents* – both within unions and elsewhere – that are moving in another direction. These are currents where radical arguments can find a better hearing than is likely amongst the Zuma camp.

Within COSATU, the Zuma victory has heightened tensions around the ANC in a number of unions – this is informative. Outside COSATU, the key example is the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) has taken the bold step of calling for an election boycott. This step was opposed by Keep Left, it should be noted, which is part of the central structures of the APF.⁷

The APF position documents the record of the ANC in power, Zuma’s record on GEAR, the numerous and well-substantiated claims of corruption that have dogged his career, and the current global meltdown. Based primarily amongst community groups that have been hammered by ANC measures like prepaid metering of water, these positions are perfectly understandable. Indeed, it is a pity that COSATU – whose members face the neo-liberal offensive at work as well as in the community – does not draw the same, obvious, conclusion.⁸

Yet the APF does not reject electioneering as such: it is simply a “tactic” from the “arsenal” of the working class, and is *currently* inappropriate given the parties on offer. This is a fair point: Mikhail Bakunin himself on several occasions suggested standing comrades in local elections, and later syndicalists like Tom Mann and James Connolly were not averse to using elections for propaganda.

That said, standing in elections is an appalling tactic, and one later abandoned by Bakunin and Mann. It may be a weapon from the “arsenal”, but is a weapon that blows up in the working class’ face all too often: it creates illusions in the state, leads to the cooption of militants and movements, and consistently fails to stop the adoption of anti-working class measures (as GEAR shows). Groups linked to the APF, who have run candidates at local level, have in fact seen this happen: the most notorious example was the defection to the Democratic Alliance of the single councillor from the “Operation Khanyisa” party. Yet the same illusions in the state can also be seen in the APF’s attempt to use the ruling class courts to ban prepaid meters.

It seems, regrettably that for all its class war points, the APF rejection of elections boils down to a rejection of the ANC and of the alternatives on offer. Has the APF leadership made a real break with the view SA needs a “real” workers’ party in favour of a real critique of parliamentarism?

A better start has been made by the NOPE group, a loose collection of radicals and nationalists, including some anarchists. NOPE argued that “our dreams do not fit your ballot boxes”, and set out to question elections as such. It took issue, for example, with election adverts that said “If you don’t vote, you can’t complain”, rejecting the reduction of politics to elections. NOPE’s

⁷ See www.anarkismo.net

⁸ Also see en.wikipedia.org/!

strength was in questioning elections; its weakness was its refusal to provide any real answer to the questions it raised — what is the alternative?⁹

The same vagueness existed within its ranks, leading to some vicious infighting. This included clashes over the issue of nationalism: it needs to be clear that a rejection of nationalism is not reducible to a rejection of the ANC but to all forms of nationalism in the current period, including Africanism and Afrikaner nationalism.

TO RESIST, UNCEASINGLY

The alternative to voting Zuma, to voting for a new party, or to simply questioning voting is class struggle. It would certainly benefit workers and their unions if outsourcing and casualisation generally was reversed [by Zuma].

But this is unlikely — therefore the question of rebuilding union strength rests essentially on the willingness of unions to actively organise against neo-liberalism. There were important struggles by outsourced workers on university campuses over the last few years, as well as great achievements in the service sector in uniting permanent and casual staff — notably at Woolworths.

In the community struggles, the installation of prepaid meters has been stopped — in practice, although perhaps not on paper — by resistance, resistance which has created facts on the ground — resistance that has, manifestos aside, court cases aside, broken in practice the back of the attempt to make the poor pay for water — partially decommodifying water and lights from below

Even before that, around 2000–2001, the ANC under Mbeki himself, was forced to write off billions of Rands of service debts and to provide (however limited) a free “lifeline” of water and electricity to large sections of the working class. The increased welfare spending over the last few years — such as real growth in old age pensions’ value — must be seen in a similar light.

It is through such struggles that real changes are enforced. Party intrigues, manifestos, “critical” support — these do not help. To link back to Ba Jin, the task is not a “critical” vote for Zuma, nor to try and make him keep his promises — it is struggle from below, based on clarity regarding the nationalist regime.

Rudolph Rocker put the perspective well in ‘*Anarcho-syndicalism*’: the “peoples owe all the political rights and privileges ... not to the good will of their governments, but to their own strength”: “*What is important is not that governments have decided to concede certain rights to the people, but the reason why they have had to do this*”.

The end of apartheid was not delivered on a plate by the ANC, but through tears and sacrifice from below. It required direct action, and just as importantly, a mental shift — a fundamental rejection of the very ideological cement that kept the system together. When the masses moved, the state soon faced a crisis.

Today, the end of neo-liberalism is a bigger fight. It is a fight against far deeper forces. But it can be won. The end of neo-liberalism will not be delivered on a plate by a Zuma — quite the opposite. It will require tears and sacrifice from below. It will require also a break with the ideological cement that keeps the system together: the deep-seated belief in the validity of capitalism, the state, nationalism and neo-liberalism. And none of this can be done without criticising the ANC or Zuma — although that is not enough, and should never be the sum total of such critique. It is

⁹ www.nope.org.za/

a battle of ideas anarchists are fighting — for a fundamental “*transvaluation of values*” and the removal of the “authority principle” (Emma Goldman, ‘The Failure of the Russian Revolution’).

IDEAS PLUS ACTION

The system we live in, argued Bakunin, generated a fundamental antagonism to capitalism and landlordism, and the State, and a desire for “material well-being” and to “live and work an atmosphere of freedom” (‘The Policy of the International’). Yet while the popular classes were “poverty-stricken and discontented”, in the very depths of the “utmost poverty” they often “fail to show signs of stirring” or rejecting the system itself (‘Letters to a Frenchman’). What was missing was a “new social philosophy”, a “new faith” in the possibility of a new social order, and in the ability of ordinary people to create such a society (‘The Programme of the Alliance’).

All of this required the formation of a nucleus of conscious anarchist militants — a specifically anarchist “political” organisation with clear tactics, aims and structures — that would work within the mass organisations and elsewhere. It was “absolutely necessary”, said Bakunin, to build such an organisation, to “stress theoretical principles, to expound these principles clearly and in all their purity, and thus to build a party which, though small in number, would be composed of sincere men, fully and passionately dedicated to these principles” (‘Letters to a Frenchman’).

This task remains vital: the organisation is not a Leninist substitute for the masses, and indeed, cannot exist without implantation in the masses; however, it is indispensable as a catalyst in the struggles of the masses, and a safeguard that will “combat all ambition to dominate the revolutionary movement of the people” by “cliques or individuals” (‘On the Internal Conduct of the Alliance’).

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