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Our History of Struggle

The 1980s “Workerist-Populist” Debate Revisited

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December 9, 2014

Retrieved on 5th August 2021 from anarkismo.net
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union, NUMSA, finally made moves to pull out of the Tripartite Alliance.

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Democratic, worker-controlled unions should also provide leadership to other working class sectors, like township movements. “Workerists” sought to intervene in neighbourhoods through union “locals” in townships and by promoting democratic models of community organising. They could be said to have favoured a working class “united front” – against the ANC’s “popular front.” The new nation, they argued, would be non-racial and working class-controlled.

Problems with “Workerism”

There were some similarities between “workerism” and syndicalism (anarchist trade unionism), but a core weakness of “workerism” was the lack of a clear enough approach of change – or outline of a future society – as compared to the ANC’s concrete “NDR” project.

“Populists” seem to have been better organised, winning ground against “workerists.” While “workerists” had a big impact in areas like Alexandra, “populists” captured the political space in many townships.

Some “workerists” even came to take pro-ANC positions. The drift continued in the 1990s and Mayekiso (for example) became a close ally of the neo-liberal ANC President Thabo Mbeki.

End of the debate: COSATU

COSATU’s founding congress in 1985 was heavily shaped by FOSATU. Its political resolutions were quite “workerist”: worker-controlled unions and unions to play a political role independent of ALL parties. But arguments between “workerists” and “populists” were not over – just postponed.

By 1987, “populism” was in the ascendance. By 1990, COSATU was openly allied to the ANC. Only in 2014 has a major COSATU

South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Formed in 1979, FOSATU was the key union federation before COSATU and included the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), which would later make up the core of NUMSA.

“Workerists” like FOSATU’s Moses Mayekiso and Joe Foster were critical of alliances with black elites and tended to anti-capitalist positions. “Workerism” opposed “populism,” predicting – correctly – that the ANC would turn on the working class once in state power. It stressed that nationalists always attacked the working class after Independence, pointing to Robert Mugabe’s repression of unions in the early 1980s in Zimbabwe.

The ANC’s “populist” style was also criticised by “workerists” for undermining democratic mass organising. While FOSATU built mass structures, factory by factory, based on meetings and mandated shopstewards, “populists” relied on unaccountable leaders who announced campaigns and expected the masses to follow. This made the “workerists” wary of working with movements influenced by “populists.”

The “Workerist” Alternative

“Workerists” were not entirely united on giving an alternative to “populism,” but generally wanted some sort of “socialism” after apartheid fell. “Workerism” stressed ordinary people must have a real say: they criticised the top-down, dictatorial Marxist regimes of Russia and China.

“Workerists” insisted that unions not be allied to nationalists like the ANC, or Marxists like the SACP. “Workerism” depended on workers acting through the unions and saw no reason for a political party to direct the struggles of workers and their communities. It emphasised the importance of independent BUT political unions: these should have their OWN political direction, not decided by outside parties.

EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION: Today the terms “populism” and “workerism” are widely thrown about in South African political circles. Often, these terms and others (“syndicalism,” “ultra-left,” “counter-revolutionary,” “anti-majoritarian” ...) have no meaning: they are just labels used to silence critics. SA Communist Party (SACP) leaders do this often. But in the 1980s, “populism” and “workerism” referred to two rival positions battling for the soul of the militant unions.

These debates, thirty years on, remain very relevant: let us revisit them, and learn. Today’s radical National Union of Metalworkers of SA (NUMSA) was part of the “workerist” camp, while its key rival, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was identified with “populism.” The early battles over the direction of the Congress of SA Trade Unions (COSATU) still echo today, although there is no longer a clear “workerist” camp.

What was “Populism”?

The 1980s “populists” were basically supporters of a brand of African National Congress (ANC) politics.

They aimed at a “popular front” of all oppressed classes and strata in the black population – including black capitalists and homeland leaders – plus white anti-apartheid democrats. Their programme was basically “nationalist,” which meant the whole “nation” was to unite across class lines and express its will through a nation-state. The anti-apartheid movement represented (they argued) a multi-class, non-racial “new nation” in the making.

This nation and the class alliance it represented, “populists” said, had to be led by a political party, the ANC. Through the ANC the “new nation” would take state power, rule South Africa and uproot apartheid and its legacy.

“Populism” and Unions

So, in the 1980s “populism” basically meant uniting as many forces opposed to apartheid as possible (and in particular, oppressed black people as a whole) under ANC leadership.

And since the “national” or “popular” and “democratic” alliance had to include ALL classes, it could NOT take a revolutionary anti-capitalist position, since this would keep out capitalists. Anti-capitalists in the “populist” camp – notably the SACP – argued that the aims of this “national democratic” struggle were basically to overthrow apartheid, not capitalism. “Socialism” would only come after the ANC-led “national democratic” struggle was underway. To make “socialism” an immediate demand would split the nation.

For “populists” in the trade union movement (especially in NUM and around key figures like Cyril Ramaphosa and Jay Naidoo) this meant giving the ANC the reins of struggle and making unions part of the ANC’s camp. This meant unions would support the ANC taking state power as a political party.

Problems with “Populism”

Simply, “populism” supported what we now have: an ANC-led Tripartite Alliance, in which COSATU is a junior partner. COSATU’s role is to aid the ANC’s “national democratic revolution” (NDR) by providing money, leaders and votes.

One problem is that alliances like this are used to control unions: since NDR is a multi-class, capitalist project, COSATU ends up supporting a capitalist, statist ANC in the name of “revolution.” Through the alliance, the working class is married to the ruling class of capitalists and politicians which oppresses and exploits it. So, the Alliance benefits the elite much more than the working class.

Nationalist politicians claim to represent the whole society, but society is divided by classes. The ruling class (the political and economic elite) are at war with the working class. Cyril Ramaphosa, billionaire, ANC deputy president and co-owner of Lonmin, the site of the 2012 Marikana Massacre, is evidence that the black elite have nothing in common with the working class, black or white. It is difficult to see how, in such conditions, the legacy of apartheid can be uprooted without some sort of radical bottom-up “socialism” (anarchism) being created.

Second, many COSATU leaders get rewarded for being in the Alliance and are co-opted into the ruling class – meaning they are turned against the workers. Ramaphosa, a former NUM leader, is a good example – but he is only part of a larger process that corrupts and weakens unions. This process leads to certain COSATU leaders doing the dirty work of the ANC and the ruling class that runs it.

“Populism” is basically in favour of the state – the problem is that all states serve the ruling class. To think the state can be used for the masses is an illusion.

“Populism” also serves the politicians. It aims to attract as many people as possible so that it can get its political party into state power, most times via elections. To this purpose, populists regularly hijack working class struggles and swallow the movements of the masses on their road to power. “Populism” uses militant rhetoric, but, ultimately, is an elitist project.

Coupled with the tendency of “populism” to corrupt unions, populism has a strongly anti-democratic tendency: working class movements get corrupted, misled and used. This is surely clear after more than 20 years of the Tripartite Alliance in SA.

What was “Workerism”?

“Workerism” in the 1980s meant a left-wing current centred on a bloc of trade unions, mainly in and coming from the Federation of