

Reply to a defender of the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party

11 October 2001

We reproduce below a letter criticising an earlier correspondent's email about the ANC, together with a response by Barbara Slaughter.

Dear Editor,

In November last year a certain EG wrote denouncing the ANC who, along with its alliance partners are “leading a sustained attack on the working class behind a cloud of pseudo-socialist rhetoric.”

I do hope that EG has taken note of the recent Cosatu-SACP [Congress of South African Trade Unions-South African Communist Party] strike action against the increasing privatization of the public sector and the growing split between them and the ANC. This is, however, not a new separation but a logical extension since Cosatu has never made any secret of their dissatisfaction with the government's neo-liberal fixations (Pres Mbeki is a trained economist after all, and both the Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, and his second-in-command, Maria Ramos, are touted to take up positions at the World Bank when their terms end).

Cosatu and the SACP receive very little support from the media in South Africa; rash denunciations in WWS do no justice to the cause of workers in South Africa nor take their difficult position into consideration—there is no other party outside the ANC with any shred of socio-political credibility in South Africa.

Yours sincerely,

CJ

Barbara Slaughter replies:

Dear CJ,

Your letter is a crude apology for the anti-working class politics of the Congress of South African Trade Unions and the South African Communist Party.

You seek to chastise another reader (see: letter from EG) who expressed support for an article written by myself, South Africa's ANC government faces growing opposition. In my article, I pointed out that the IMF and the World Bank had recently praised the ANC government. The World Bank president had assured international investors that there was no possibility of South Africa adopting land policies to similar those of the Zanu-PF government in Zimbabwe.

EG's letter explained that the thrust of the ANC government's new land policy—the “Integrated Programme for Land Reform and Agricultural Development”—represented “the creation of a black commercial farming class in South Africa”. This is an extension of the economic policy of “black empowerment”, the privatisation programme that has included a large number of buy-outs by recently enriched black entrepreneurs.

In your own letter you make no comment on the land question, but spring to the defence of Cosatu and the SACP, claiming that the two-day strike on August 29 and 30 against the government's privatisation programme demonstrates their opposition to the “government's neo-liberal fixations”. Your letter concludes with an attempt to justify the governmental alliance between the SACP, Cosatu and the ANC by

claiming that outside of the ANC there is no other party “with any shred of socio-political credibility”.

The SACP plays a key role in government. Minister of Public Enterprise Jeff Radebe, Minister of Local Government Sydney Mufamadi and Minister of Water Affairs and Forestry Ronnie Kasrils are all Communist Party members and are directly involved in the restructuring programme. On August 29, the first day of the recent general strike, Radebe pointed out that the restructuring of government assets, including their partial privatisation, had been agreed in advance by all the government partners, including Cosatu.

In a press statement on August 27, the SACP insisted that the strike “was not about a vote of no confidence in the government, but rather seeking to defend and build a strong public sector.” Despite the fact that the living standards of the vast majority of South Africans are no better, and for some are actually worse than under the apartheid system, the SACP statement claimed that the working class has made “enormous gains” under the ANC government. It also sought to absolve the government of responsibility for the privatisation programme by sending “a message to the bosses and all capitalists classes internationally and locally, that they should desist from pressurising government into selling off public assets”.

A few days before, a radio debate was held about the strike between Cosatu Secretary General Zwelinzima Vavi (another SACP member) and Public Enterprise Minister Radebe. Vavi said that although Cosatu felt that the government had “gotten carried away”, it believed the ANC was still dedicated to improving the lot of all South Africans. “Our strike arises because we disagree with their method of achieving that, not because we doubt their good faith.”

Cosatu and the SACP have no fundamental differences with the government. Indeed since coming to power the ANC has relied heavily on the SACP and Cosatu to control the working class. In the early years of the post-apartheid regime, they were instrumental in suppressing industrial action and their support for the ANC has continued to the present day.

The recent anti-privatisation campaign—a series of lunch-time rallies and a two-day strike every three months—is designed to let off steam rather than mobilise the opposition to the government building up in the among millions of workers.

Perhaps the starkest example was the case of the autoworkers that were sacked at the Volkswagen factory in Uitenhage in January last year for taking unofficial strike action. The dispute was provoked by the actions of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), which had suspended 13 shop stewards, claiming they had brought the union into disrepute. Some 1,450 workers went on strike to defend their stewards and in defiance of the union. The workers were sacked a week later because they ignored an ultimatum ordering them back to work. After the sackings Numsa collaborated with management in making sure no further industrial

action took place.

President Mbeki targeted the Volkswagen strikers in last year's presidential address. He denounced them, declaring that the ANC's "standing in the eyes of the investor community cannot be held hostage by elements pursuing selfish and anti-social purposes". Both Cosatu and the SACP immediately issued press statements welcoming his support for the Volkswagen management and his hard line against "illegal labour actions". I could give other examples.

The truth is that although there has been increasing friction between the SACP and Cosatu on the one hand, and Mbeki's supporters on the other, there are no differences of principle between them. Cosatu and the SACP are acutely conscious of the growing disaffection in the working class, and are concerned that the government may lose control of the situation. They seek to promote a programme of economic nationalism, with more state control and are opposed to what they deem excessive foreign investment and privatisation. On the opening of parliament this year, they organised a demonstration outside the building demanding a halt the import of cheap goods from the Far East.

The group around Mbeki wants to open up the South African economy to the world market and are encouraging investment from the transnational corporations. They recognise the need for domestic industry to become internationally competitive if it is to grow beyond the limits of the national market.

However, both factions are determined to defend the profit system at all costs. Long before it was elected to government in 1994, the ANC advocated the creation of "black capitalism" whilst claiming to be fighting for a classless society. In an article published in *Liberation* in June 1956, Mandela put forward his interpretation of the 1953 Freedom Charter. He called for the creation of a "non-European bourgeoisie [which] will have the opportunity to own in their own name and right the mills and factories and trade and private enterprise will boom and flourish as never before."

The SACP endorsed this pro-capitalist perspective and subordinated the working class to the leadership of the aspiring black bourgeoisie. This was based on the "two-stage theory" of revolution, adopted in the 1920s by the Soviet Communist Party to serve the interests of the bureaucracy, headed by Joseph Stalin. It bore no relation to the programme and perspectives of the Bolshevik Party that successfully overthrew Tsarism in 1917 and established the first workers' state.

According to this Stalinist theory, the first objective of the SACP was to establish bourgeois democracy in South Africa. Only at some unspecified time in the future would conditions allow for the "final victory of socialism". Throughout the 1950s the Stalinist parties supported national liberation movements like the ANC, as part of the Cold War conflict with the imperialist powers. But they had no intention of promoting socialist revolutions, which would have destabilised the position of the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

It was as a result of its association with the SACP that the ANC was able to maintain its left-wing credentials. During the 1970 and 80s the South African working class grew in strength and confidence. The mid-1980s saw the development of insurrectionary struggles involving schools, universities, factories and townships, which took the ANC by surprise. As one journal put it, the youth in the town-ships were not only "ungovernable to the enemy", but also "ungovernable to their own organisations".

It was the socialist rhetoric of the SACP that enabled the ANC to keep control of the mass movement. They used their positions in the trade union bureaucracy to keep workers within the bounds of political protest considered acceptable to figures such as Nobel Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other liberal opponents of apartheid.

During the late 1980s the apartheid government recognised that if capitalism were to be preserved in South Africa concessions would have

to be made, and the ban on the ANC, SACP and other organisations would have to be lifted. Nelson Mandela's release from prison in February 1990 was greeted by a wave of protests, rent, school and consumer boycotts. The ANC had the task of containing the protests and transforming what had been a national liberation movement into a potential governing party. Without the SACP, the ANC could not have dealt with the situation. At this time, the ANC was still promising to nationalise the mines, banks and monopoly industries.

By 1991, the ANC had put any notion of nationalising the mines and other industries in cold storage and was stressing that only limited wealth redistribution was possible within a "mixed economy". In 1993, a year before the election that brought it to power, the ANC adopted the Reconstruction and Development Programme. This made vague references to nationalisation, but also pledged to "reduce the public sector in certain areas in ways that will enhance efficiency, advance affirmative action and empower the historically disadvantaged". After winning the election by a landslide majority, Mandela initiated limited reforms in certain areas such as labour legislation, but the fundamental class structure of South African society remained untouched.

The government continues to claim it lacks the resources to provide basic necessities, like clean water and electricity that were promised to millions of ordinary families. But with workers' living standards under attack, and unemployment at almost 40 percent, there is no shortage of fat cats in and around the ANC who are enriching themselves. (One example is Cyril Ramaphosa, the founder and former leader of the National Union of Mineworkers and general secretary of the ANC. Today, he is one of the country's foremost super-rich black businessmen and is chairman of Anglo-American and South African Breweries.)

The World Bank calculates that income inequality in South Africa is amongst the highest in the world.

The working class of South Africa requires a new political leadership to represent its independent interests. This is what the *World Socialist Web Site* is working to achieve. We will not be diverted from this task by allegations that criticism of the present misleaders of the working class plays into the hands of the class enemy. Quite the contrary: calling things by their right name is the precondition for a long-overdue political reorientation of the workers' movement.

Yours sincerely,

Barbara Slaughter



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