

South African unions vie for control of militant workers

Part one

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On February 3, about 1,800 National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) members at Anglo American Platinum's (Amplats') processing division joined a strike of at least 70,000 workers called by the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

AMCU called the strike on January 23 at the world's top three platinum producers, Amplats, Impala Platinum Mining (Implats) and Lonmin. The union's main demand was a wage increase to R12,500 (US\$1,136) per month, almost three times what entry-level workers now earn. By February 17 the parties were no closer to a resolution. Talks had broken off two weeks before so that the labour dispute resolution body, the Committee for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA), could engage the parties individually. In an indication of the unease in ruling circles over the protracted action, on February 18 Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan called for an end to the strike, with Anglo American CEO Mark Cutifani vowing to sell the group's labour-intensive platinum mines at which workers have struck.

The strike decision by NUMSA is an escalation of its standoff with the dominant trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Differences among the trade union elite reached a pitch in August 2012 with the suspension of COSATU General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi. Formal charges against him include bringing COSATU into disrepute through a sex scandal and unauthorised spending, including on his wife and ex-wife.

In official discourse, on one side were the "pro-capitalist" Jacob Zuma loyalists, including COSATU President S'dumo Dlamini and National Education Health and Allied Workers Union General Secretary Fikile Majola. Ranged against them, were the "pro-socialist" leaders of NUMSA, Irvin Jim and Karl Cloete, with support from co-thinkers in eight other unions.

In fact, neither group represents the working class. The

present factional disagreement, as intense as it is, is only a difference over tactics. Vavi's essential argument against people like Zuma is not that capitalism needs to be overthrown. He is only urging greater subterfuge in the way that workers are used by the Tripartite Alliance on behalf of its capitalist masters. For their own reasons, including a desire not to set precedents by submitting to working class pressure, the pro-Zuma faction has set out to make an example of Vavi.

COSATU factionalism can be traced back at least into the Mandela administration. Significant factions in the African Nationalist Congress (ANC) were relenting to pressure from global capital not to repudiate the state's apartheid-era debts and to manage the economy "responsibly". ANC leaders considered all alternatives to laissez-faire capitalism unviable, especially in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. As a member of the Tripartite Alliance with the ruling ANC and Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP), COSATU became a vital means of attracting the working class vote and then subordinating it to the ANC's perpetuation of a privileged capitalist minority.

Vavi and others paid lip service to workers' demands. They bemoaned the open ANC co-optation of unionists and its attempts to turn COSATU into a "labour desk" of the ANC. COSATU and the SACP at that time stood together in taking exception to the "1996 Class Project" by which ANC "nationalists," including Thabo Mbeki, invalidated their policy contributions. In the cautious critique of current deputy transport minister and SACP deputy general secretary, Jeremy Cronin, the 1996 Class Project depended "upon the ANC and alliance for electoral reproduction but [...] seeks to hollow-out the movement at the same time[.]"

The hollowing-out found expression in the way former unionists were fast-tracked through the ANC ranks, including Kgalema Motlanthe, Gwede Mantashe, Mbhazima Shilowa and Cyril Ramaphosa. They won such promotion by explicitly putting party loyalty first and their union members

last. For this reason, COSATU members for years resisted the idea of Vavi being “redeployed”, for instance to parliament. Vavi himself deftly played on the sentiments of ordinary unionists. This made him the darling of other trade union leaders who were excluded by the ANC from the benefits of access to state resources.

Vavi’s section of the trade union elite exploited working class outrage at the pro-rich policies of the two Mbeki administrations. Vavi’s acolytes channelled mass resentment into support for Jacob Zuma, when Mbeki, even going to the extent of using state organs to scapegoat Zuma in a series of scandals, ended up firing him from the deputy presidency in 2005.

COSATU delegates to the ANC’s 2007 Polokwane conference cooperated with the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) of Julius Malema to elect Zuma president over Mbeki. They did this on the understanding that union bureaucrats would thereafter have, among other things, greater say over policy, thereby burnishing their image with the union rank-and-file. Investor-friendly policies would be masked through formulations like “broad-based black economic empowerment” (BEE). Inevitably, the first beneficiaries of such a policy would be the leaders of the pro-Zuma faction.

Zuma, however, simply could not deliver to the expectations of all. Most of the choicest BEE deals in any case had already gone to members of the court of Mbeki, including Saki Macozoma, Mzi Khumalo and most prominently, billionaire Patrice Motsepe, brother-in-law to Zuma’s Justice Minister Jeff Radebe. Worst of all, by the time Zuma took over from caretaker-President Kgalema Motlanthe after the 2009 general election, the global credit crisis was in full swing.

Foreign direct investment flows languished at some 2 percent of GDP, or US\$1.7 billion net in 2012, a 43.6 percent year-on-year decline, according to the United Nations Global Investment Trends Monitor. As in other emerging markets, current outflows are bound to worsen with the ongoing “tapering” of the original US\$85 billion per month asset-and bond-buying programme of the United States Federal Reserve Board.

To workers, Zuma nonetheless made a lightheaded promise in 2011, on which he will clearly never deliver, to create five million jobs in 10 years. To investors, he strove to project an image of fiscal austerity, partly by retaining Mbeki’s finance minister Trevor Manuel in a new economic planning portfolio.

Julius Malema promptly turned the ANCYL on Zuma, when he saw the cup thus being snatched from his lips. He openly campaigned for Zuma’s removal as ANC president at the party’s 2012 Mangaung conference. On the

conference agenda, he had managed to have the question of nationalisation of mines and farms included for debate. However, he failed to have Zuma removed, was expelled after a disciplinary hearing for bringing the party into disrepute, and saw the ANCYL dismembered amid his (Malema’s) continuing corruption woes.

Malema’s founding of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was his response. The reaction of COSATU’s largest affiliate, NUMSA, came at a special national congress in Ekurhuleni, east of Johannesburg last December. That convention called on Zuma to resign, resolved to withhold logistical and financial support to the ANC election effort, to freeze affiliation fee payments to COSATU and to investigate the feasibility of forming a united front of nominally leftist organisations as an “alternative” to the ANC. ? ?

At the same time, NUMSA has fought to have COSATU convene a special national congress. There, the nine pro-Vavi unions would quash the charges against him, reinstate him as general secretary and boot out the opposing faction under Dlamini. Senior trade union officials could then apply themselves to the round of machinations necessary to secure their political ascendancy.

While the union elite squabble among themselves for spheres of influence, the working class has observed and drawn its own conclusions. Here the miners were in the vanguard with their decision that they could only count on obstruction from bourgeois organisations like NUMSA—the ex-union of Motlanthe, Mantashe and Ramaphosa, the archetype of the junior local partners whose enrichment have made possible the continued imperialist exploitation of South African workers. Ramaphosa belongs in the same class as leaders like Nelson Mandela and the Stalinist Joe Slovo for his services to capitalism.

To be continued



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