

South African trade union federation promotes illusions in Castroism

Part one

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At an event on August 29 marking the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Cuban and South African governments, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi promoted Castroism as a panacea for capitalism.

Vavi delivered his address, titled “Socialism has worked in Cuba!”, to an audience that included the Cuban ambassador to South Africa, Carlos Fernandez de Cossio, Minister in the Presidency Jeff Radebe, South African Communist Party (SACP) Deputy General Secretary Solly Mapaila and various members of the COSATU Central Executive Committee.

“For more than half a century,” Vavi asserted, “Cuba has been a beacon of hope for workers around the world.”

This entirely false hope has been unstintingly fostered around the world by various groups on the left wing of bourgeois politics, including COSATU and the Stalinist SACP. These upper-middle-class supporters of Fidel and Raul Castro have based themselves on the brothers’ narrow hostility to American imperialism, above all in Latin America and Africa. On this foundation, and following Fidel’s lead, they have promoted a radical section of Cuban bourgeois nationalists as something the Castroites have never been—Marxist revolutionaries.

Fidel Castro was a bourgeois nationalist opponent of the government of US puppet Fulgencio Batista. He came to power at the head of a small nationalist guerrilla movement that succeeded in January 1959 in overthrowing Batista. He and his followers were able to win the support of the Cuban working class because even its limited social policies were more radical than those put forward by the Stalinists, who were widely viewed as accomplices of Batista.

Castro attempted to reach an accommodation with the US, visiting the United Nations just four months after coming to power and offering friendly relations and private investment opportunities in Cuba. But the US was not interested in any agreement and stopped buying Cuban sugar.

Their attitude hardened following Castro’s nationalisation of US-owned properties, and particularly after Fidel turned to the Soviet Union for an alternative export market and development assistance. In 1961, the US launched the botched Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. That same year, Fidel for the first time described himself as a “Marxist-Leninist,” having completed his turn towards the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy.

Referring to the South African situation in his August 29 speech, Vavi continued, “Our own national democratic revolution could have been delayed for years were it not for the huge contribution of those

Cuban combatants, whose victory over the mighty apartheid regime at...Cuito Cuanavale paved the way for the...overthrow of our racist oppressors.”

Cuito Cuanavale is a southeastern Angolan town whose outskirts saw heavy fighting in what were the dying years of both the Cold War and the South African white supremacist regime. The engagement marked the climax of about a dozen years of inconclusive clashes between the Cuban and South African armed forces. Africa’s largest land battle up to that point (1987-1988), the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale is claimed as a victory by supporters of both sides.

With the overthrow of the totalitarian Estado Novo (New State) regime in the 1974 military coup in Portugal, which signalled the beginning of the “Carnation Revolution,” Lisbon withdrew from its African colonies and East Timor. Up to then, three groups were engaged in armed conflict against the Portuguese in Angola: the Soviet-sponsored Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Mobutu Sese Seko-backed National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), and Jonas Savimbi’s National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), backed by the US and South Africa.

These three contended with each other over the vacuum left by the Portuguese pullout. The Cubans stayed on after 1975, when they helped the MPLA gain power in Luanda and central Angola against a combined South African/CIA intervention. The FNLA of Holden Roberto until its elimination was relegated to the north, while UNITA dominated the south.

In 1987, the Angolan army, FAPLA, launched Operation Greeting October from Cuito with Soviet support and against the advice of the more experienced Cubans. The objective was to consolidate control over the entire country by expelling UNITA from the south, particularly from their strongholds farther southeast at Mavinga and Jamba.

This cut across the South African strategy of maintaining UNITA-controlled territory as a buffer between northern Angola and South-West Africa (Namibia), which South Africa administered. The apartheid regime used South-West Africa as a bulwark against black Africa in defiance of UN General Assembly Resolution 2145. The resolution lifted the original League of Nations mandate awarding South Africa—then British-ruled—the right to administer the territory. Up until the beginning of World War I, South-West Africa had been a German colony.

The South African refusal to cede self-rule to South West Africa was bound up with racist paranoia over African independence in toto

and black majority rule in South Africa in particular. With the final demise in 1980 of Ian Smith's Rhodesia, South Africa and South-West Africa were the only parts of the continent not in black hands.

In the early 1980s, under the impetus of the Reagan administration's obsession to rid Angola of the Soviets and the Cubans, the US became directly involved in negotiations with the MPLA. The MPLA argued it would safely reduce the number of Cuban troops and Soviet advisors within its borders except for the continuing South African incursions and threats on its southern border. They held out South-West African self-rule as the most obvious solution. This would deprive white-ruled South Africa of a base of operations, from which it continued to destabilise the entire sub-region.

The South-West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) first took up arms against their white overlords in 1966. In the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale, Pretoria aimed to prevent Soviet-supported SWAPO from using southern Angola to launch attacks into South-West Africa, quite apart from South African horror at the prospect of Eastern Bloc influence being extended at UNITA's expense from the centre of the country to Angola's southernmost border. When FAPLA advanced from Cuito to attack UNITA at Mavinga, the South African Defence Force (SADF) moved to protect UNITA by stopping that advance.

FAPLA forces numbered some 10,000, in addition to an estimated 1,500 Cubans. The SADF fielded about 4,000 men, in comparison to UNITA's 8,000. In the six months of fighting to March 1988, the FAPLA/Cuban forces suffered casualties of 4,785 compared to UNITA's 3,000. Officially, Pretoria acknowledged the loss of just 31 men, an unconscionably low number.

By October 7, 1987, the SADF had stopped the offensive for a third time and prevented FAPLA from crossing the Lomba River. FAPLA suffered heavy losses and the embarrassed Soviets withdrew their advisors from the scene, leaving the Angolans without senior leadership.

On November 15, Luanda appealed to Cuba for aid. Castro responded by approving Operation *Maniobra XXXI Aniversario de las FAR* (31st Anniversary of the Revolutionary Armed Forces Manoeuvre) on the same day, taking the initiative from the Soviets. Cuba dispatched a trans-Atlantic airlift and sealift of 15,000 troops and materiel, including tanks, artillery, antiaircraft weapons and aircraft. The first Cuban reinforcements were deployed at Cuito Cuanavale in mid-January 1988.

On February 25 FAPLA and the Cubans faced the South Africans in their fourth clash. This time, the SADF was repulsed so vigorously that they had to retreat to positions east of the Tumpo River. The failure of this attack boosted FAPLA's flagging morale and brought the South African advance to a standstill. On March 23, the South Africans launched their last attack to no visible effect.

The superiority of Cuba's Soviet-built MiG-23s at Cuito proved decisive in convincing the SADF—much of whose equipment was dated thanks to an international arms embargo dating back to 1977—to withdraw. SADF setbacks on the ground naturally followed on from the Cuban aerial dominance.

Unsuspected by Pretoria, the Cubans were preparing to open a second front at Lubango, which for years had served as a base for unhampered SADF operations. On March 10 Cuban, FAPLA and SWAPO units advanced southwest. They clashed with the SADF at Calueque, leading to months of bloody encounters, but the Cubans pushed on towards the border with South-West Africa. To project their air power into South-West Africa, by June they had built forward bases at Cahama and Xangongo.

When they withdrew from the outskirts of Cuito, the SADF left a "holding force" of 1,500 men. This remnant continued to shell FAPLA positions from a range of some 35 kilometres. With the Cubans invincible in the air, the rump at Cuito faced certain annihilation. As tribute to Pretoria's alarm, on June 8, 1988, the SADF called up 140,000 men of the reserve Citizen Force, though this was soon cancelled.

South African forces retreated across the border into South-West Africa on June 27. By then, Cuban MiGs were flying in and out of South-West African airspace. South African installations around the Calueque dam and pumping station were under aerial bombardment, as were the bridge and hydroelectric equipment supplying power to South-West Africa. The SADF scaled back all other operations in Angola, effectively withdrawing from combat and positioning one division on the South-West African side of the border.

In 1977, West Germany plus the US, Britain and France in their capacity as permanent members of the UN Security Council had formed the "Western Contact Group." This diplomatic initiative strove to end South Africa's illegal occupation of South-West Africa and transition the territory to independence. The Contact Group upheld UN Security Council Resolution 435, which anticipated a ceasefire and UN-supervised elections in South-West Africa.

The Contact Group was merely one visible aspect of much broader US Government manoeuvres for influence in Angola and across the region. Portugal's conservative Salazar regime had traditionally enjoyed US backing. Around the time of the Carnation Revolution, however, the US increased its clandestine support for the FNLA, which was allied to the US puppet regime of Mobutu in neighbouring Zaire.

While publicly the US administration was sworn to an arms embargo against the Angolan anticolonial movements, it was secretly in the throes of launching a paramilitary programme against the MPLA. Towards this end, the US for the first time began funding UNITA, an initially Maoist splinter of the FNLA.

On July 18, 1975, President Gerald Ford approved a covert CIA operation named IA FEATURE. The aim was to provide the FNLA and UNITA with arms, instructors and up to US\$30 million in funds.

Nathaniel Davis, assistant secretary of state for African Affairs (and previously US ambassador to Chile during the CIA-deposed presidency of Salvador Allende), objected to his senior, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and went on to resign over Ford's approval of IA FEATURE.

Davis thought the Soviets were bound to uncover the existence of IA FEATURE. The upshot, according to him, would be negative publicity for the US and stepped-up Soviet involvement in Angola.

Following its discovery of IA FEATURE, the US Congress passed the Clark Amendment to the Arms Export Control Act in 1976. Its ostensible effect was to delegitimise aid to private groups, notably UNITA, engaged in military operations in Angola until the amendment's 1985 repeal. Up to that point, the US relied in part on Israel to funnel arms to its Angolan proxies through Zaire.

To be continued



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