

South African trade union federation promotes illusions in Castroism

Part Two

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This is the conclusion of a two-part article on the promotion of Castroism by South Africa's trade unions. The first part, published here, reviewed Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi's speech hailing Castroism. The article examined the historical origins of Castroism and its relationship to South Africa and the civil war in Angola in the 1980s.

With the election of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet premier in 1985, the Soviet Union expressed a stronger interest in a political solution in Angola. The elevation of Gorbachev was itself bound up with the desperation of a faction of the Stalinist elite for a way out of the dead-end of their autarkic economy, which the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had helped bring to a pitch. Under the pretext of fighting corruption and reforming Soviet society, Gorbachev set in motion the process that was to restore capitalism in the USSR.

The implications of a stronger Soviet desire for detente with the West were not lost on the American ruling class. A tottering, less confrontational Soviet Union meant the removal of the brake that for decades had been placed on American imperialism. Jonas Savimbi of the US-backed National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), when he was fêted in Washington towards the end of the second Reagan administration, made a point of thanking his hosts, the conservative Heritage Institute, for their role in the repeal of the Clark Amendment, which had curtailed aid to UNITA.

During negotiations in 1988, US assistant secretary of state for African affairs Chester Crocker repeatedly asked Cuba for assurances that the Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola/Cuban force would not march into South-West Africa (now Namibia), cabling his senior, Secretary of State George Schultz: "The Cuban build-up in southwest Angola has created an unpredictable military dynamic."

Cuban chief negotiator Jorge Risquet refused to give an undertaking that his country would not invade South-West Africa. The Cubans replaced him with the more conciliatory Carlos Aldana Escalante. In the event, Cuba did not overrun South-West Africa and agreed to withdraw from Angola within 30 months, following implementation of UN Resolution 435.

The "Geneva Protocol," signed by the parties on August 5, stipulated a South African withdrawal from Angola from August 1

that was completed by September 1. On August 8 a cease-fire came into effect.

When, on December 22, 1988, Angola, Cuba and South Africa signed the final Three Powers Accord in New York, Cuba calculated that the MPLA was capable of defeating UNITA, once Resolution 435 was in force, since it would no longer have support from South Africa. Furthermore, while Pretoria tried to influence the outcome of the South-West African election, Cuban ally SWAPO garnered 57 percent of the vote. Namibia duly gained independence in March 1990.

In consequence, as Vavi's comments show, Cuban prestige among the bourgeois "left" is undiminished right down to the present. No less a bourgeois figure than Nelson Mandela, in a speech delivered in Havana in 1991, enthused: "The defeat of the racist army at Cuito Cuanavale has made it possible for me to be here today! Cuito Cuanavale was a milestone in the history of the struggle for southern African liberation!"

Certainly, Mandela's release from prison in 1990 may be cited with subsequent events as an outcome of the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. With the final withdrawal of Cuba from Angola, the Afrikaner elite were relieved of a significant stumbling block to a negotiated internal settlement. They no longer had to worry about the possible humiliation of a foreign military intervention in South Africa.

This angst had led, during the 14-year spell of P. W. Botha as defence minister from 1966, to military expenditures sometimes consuming a fifth of the budget. Sanctions and disinvestment by certain foreign multinationals compounded the damage to an economy under siege.

There is another testament to the far-reaching subjective changes that found expression among leading Afrikaners in the late 1980s. F. W. De Klerk emerged as leader of the *verligte* (enlightened) wing of the National Party in 1989. De Klerk is nephew to the late wife of hard-line National Party prime minister J. G. Strijdom. He is a son of "Jan" De Klerk, a past secretary of the NP in the staunchly conservative former Transvaal province who served as interim State President in 1975.

The *verligtes* reflected the thinking of those sections of the local bourgeoisie then coming into ascendancy, who saw that apartheid could not be bankrolled forever, nor with a white supremacist army that had just been trounced by an enemy with an Afro-

Hispanic heritage. De Klerk, with overwhelming bourgeois support, ushered the government into negotiations with anti-apartheid activists.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 fortified the bourgeois expectation that after the country's first non-racial elections, a pro-capitalist government would take office. De Klerk hastened to remove the ban of the ANC and the Communist Party the following February.

Negotiations proceeded through a gory interregnum of orchestrated violence. The first non-racial elections followed on April 27, 1994, and were won as expected by the ANC. The party of African bourgeois nationalists had succeeded with the help of anti-working class organisations like COSATU and the SACP in channeling the hopes of the masses into its overwhelming electoral base.

Nelson Mandela was sworn in as the country's first democratically elected president on May 10, 1994. Among the honoured guests that day were Fidel Castro and Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.

This fact is only incongruous if it is not recognised that Fidel, Mandela and Philip, whatever their differences, are agreed on their hostility to a movement of the working class that aims at overturning the capitalist system.

Castro's hostility to any independent political movement of the working class was apparent in his methods right from the beginning. He opposed a political movement based on the urban proletariat in favour of the rural peasantry. He attracted to himself a group of like-minded petty-bourgeois adventurers like Che Guevara.

Such a perspective has nothing Marxist about it. Revolutionary socialism requires not that workers stand aside as idle spectators to history, but that they build their own independent instruments of struggle to loose themselves from the chains of wage slavery.

What is the situation 26 years later in the various countries for which thousands of working class soldiers on both sides were killed and injured at Cuito?

In Angola, *Forbes* reported, Isabel Dos Santos, daughter of President Jose Eduardo Dos Santos, is the country's and the continent's richest woman, with total assets of some US\$3 billion. *Jornal de Angola*, the country's sole daily, remarked, "This is good for Angola. It fills Angolans with pride."

In Namibia, life expectancy at birth is estimated at 52.2 years—among the lowest in the world. HIV/AIDS affects about 13 percent of adults, a devastating health crisis that is one expression of the deep poverty that plagues the country.

In South Africa, one of the most important satraps of the imperialists, Cyril Ramaphosa, was elevated to the post of deputy president in 2014. Immediately prior to that, he did not hesitate to call on police to suppress the miners' strike at Lonmin—a company in which he was a director—in August 2012. Paramilitary police killed 34 miners in cold blood. More than 70 were injured and 250 arrested.

In Cuba, the use of the US dollar was for a time legalised following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Without Soviet subsidies, the government began opening up parts of the economy to foreign exploitation. The lack of hard currency has led to a

scramble for jobs contiguous with the tourist sector, "with trained doctors and other professionals abandoning their jobs in favour of driving taxis or cleaning hotel rooms," as the WSWs has noted. The Castros are doing in Cuba what the elite is doing in every other country—they are transferring onto the backs of workers the costs of the breakdown of the global capitalist system that began in 2008. Layoffs from state-owned corporations are increasingly the norm. Together with redundancies go speed-ups, privatisation and the gutting of the island's social welfare system. The Cuban "Communist" Party can no longer even pretend to socialism.

Thus far, the beneficiaries of "reforms" to the Cuban economy are the European, Latin American and Asian multinationals that are leading an influx of investments. US corporations cannot tap into the new market thanks to a vindictive US government embargo in force since 1960.

The *Economist* of April 5 encourages US politicians to come around to seeing the Castros as partners in profit-making. "[O]ther countries are pushing ahead," the website warns. The US stands to lose under a new Cuban law that "will slash tax rates for new investments and allow foreigners into new sectors of the economy."

Probably the *Economist* worries too much, as the memorial service for Nelson Mandela at Johannesburg's FNB Stadium last December provided another opportunity for the who's who of imperialism to catch up. Former US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush rubbed shoulders with German president Joachim Gauck, French president François Hollande and British premier David Cameron.

After his address, US president Barack Obama stopped to acknowledge Cuban president Raul Castro, who was speaking next. The two exchanged greetings. Their handshake in front of the whole world was a signal that Obama would not let the foreign rivals of US corporations monopolise the advantages of Cuba's re-integration into the world capitalist market. The lesson for workers is that the challenge to imperialism must be socialist and internationalist.

South African workers in particular should take care not to confuse Economic Freedom Fighters leader Julius Malema with some kind of working-class champion. He is nothing of the kind. He talks left (in the phrase that Thabo Mbeki used to describe his own cynical politics) and walks right.

Workers must break free of the fetters of bourgeois politicians and trade unionists. In Russia, America, Namibia, Angola, South Africa, Cuba and everywhere else, they must educate and organise themselves into a political force. Sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International must take power and form true workers' governments.

Concluded



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