

# South Africa metalworkers union announces formation of new party

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The crisis in South Africa's ruling tripartite alliance intensified on October 27, when National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) General Secretary Irvin Jim announced that the union would be forming its own political party, the United Front, to "explore the possibility of socialism in South Africa." This claim is simply left-sounding doubletalk to cover the jockeying for position of rival factions that are all committed to the defence of capitalism in South Africa.

The ruling alliance is composed of the governing African National Congress (ANC), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Stalinist South African Communist Party. COSATU's biggest affiliate, NUMSA, withdrew its support for the ANC in the May elections, declaring the party no longer represented workers' interests. Jim was quick to point out that NUMSA is not abandoning COSATU. This is despite the fact that COSATU's top executives are debating whether to expel NUMSA for signing up workers outside its industry in violation of federation policy. "[F]or the sake of unity," a decision has been put off until November 7, when NUMSA will once again be expected to give reasons why it should not be expelled or suspended.

COSATU leaders also postponed making a call on the fate of the organization's general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi. A favourite of NUMSA, Vavi is accused of various improprieties, including directing COSATU business to companies in which his relatives have stakes. He was suspended from his post by a COSATU Central Executive Committee faction led by President S'dumo Dlamini. Vavi returned to work in April after eight months off, following a South Gauteng High Court verdict that overturned the suspension as in violation of procedure.

The ANC took fright at developments in COSATU in

the run-up to the May elections. An ANC-led task team was established to try to prevent a split in the federation, which claims a membership of 2.2 million workers and forms an influential component of the ANC electoral base.

Led by Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, a millionaire businessman, the task team delivered its final report on COSATU factionalism on October 21. It called for any disciplinary action to be taken against Vavi to be "fair." *Business Day* reported, "The report also concluded that defending the ANC should never be done at the expense of defending and protecting workers belonging to COSATU."

Defending the ANC is invariably done at the expense of workers.

By fostering illusions in the person of Vavi, the NUMSA press statement announcing the United Front continues the fraud that any member of the tripartite alliance is capable of being a defender of working-class interests. "Vavi is seen as a threat to the ambitions of the right-wing capitalist forces within and outside the former liberation movement," the statement reads, "which see a COSATU under his leadership as obstructing their capitalist ambitions."

Vavi's United Front is no threat to anyone's capitalist ambitions. He is as much a beneficiary of the framework of capitalist property relations as are people like Ramaphosa.

The NUMSA statement continues, "NUMSA will not hand over COSATU to individuals and groups...who have no interest in defending the principles, values, resolutions, policies and constitution of COSATU."

There is nothing in COSATU worth defending from the point of view of workers. At stake for the wealthy union bureaucrats, however, are their fat salaries, privileges and a degree of control over the

revolutionary impulses of the working class, which they fear and loathe.

It is this attitude that informed the decision to found the United Front. This party will not, as NUMSA claims, “explore the possibility of socialism.” On the contrary, it will aim to pre-empt those workers who might be drawn to a genuinely independent political movement seeking to install a revolutionary socialist government.

The United Front decision comes at a time of heightened class tension. Already during apartheid, South Africa was one of the world’s most unequal societies. This inequality has only worsened since the ANC came to power. The response of the working class has dashed the hopes of the business and political elites. These circles had hoped that a majority-black government would smooth over the intensified exploitation of the working class following the end of white minority rule.

Instead, South African workers remain among the world’s most militant. From 2005 onwards, there was a surge in the number of working days lost to strikes. In addition, violent protests against municipal corruption and incompetence have spread across the country. This has earned South Africa the pejorative title (in the eyes of global capital) of “protest capital of the world.”

Those behind the United Front and other factions of the elite have not been able to ignore the sense of betrayal and outrage among workers.

The manoeuvres by NUMSA to found a new party began in the immediate aftermath of the August 2012 Marikana massacre in which 34 platinum miners were shot dead and 78 wounded by South African police. This led to the mass discrediting of the ANC, National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and COSATU, who were all responsible and who defended it. The massacre took place during a bitter strike of platinum workers who were demanding an increase in monthly wages to 12,500 South African Rand [US\$1,200].

A section of the trade union bureaucracy concluded that it was no longer possible to remain in an alliance with ANC President Jacob Zuma and Vice President Ramaphosa, who were the architects of the massacre. At that point NUMSA placed itself at the head of sections of the bureaucracy who are seeking to create a suitable device to contain the growing anger of the working class.

This is also why the ANC in Gauteng has come out in opposition to the widely-hated electronic tolling (e-tolls) of the province’s highways, which the national government seeks to enforce. Under the aegis of ANC Gauteng Chairman Paul Mashatile and provincial premier David Makhura, a panel of experts was convened to assess the decision to institute e-tolls.

All along, Transport Minister Dipuo Peters had said that the panel’s findings would have no effect on the national government’s decision in favour of e-tolls. Peters was forced into a humiliating climbdown on October 20, by conceding that her department will now make its own submissions to the Gauteng e-toll review panel, after having snubbed it for months.

This may be an indication of a factional realignment in the ANC. If so, it means that the upper hand belongs to a group around Ramaphosa, as opposed to that in favour of Zuma, whom Ramaphosa is expected to succeed in 2019.

Mashatile and Makhura, known supporters of Ramaphosa, are thus serving notice that they too expect a place in the sun. They will, however, reap no rewards if the ANC suffers in the 2016 municipal elections as much as it did in the May elections, when its provincial vote slumped by 11 percentage points. In an attempt to stanch this loss of support, Mashatile and Makhura are siding with popular sentiment on the matter of e-tolls.

The announcement of the United Front should be viewed in the same light. A faction of trade union bureaucrats sympathetic to Irvin Jim and Zwelinzima Vavi seeks an advantage over the faction led by S’dumo Dlamini. For that purpose and that alone, they hope to corral a section of the working class into a sham called the United Front.



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