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AN OPEN LETTER TO COSATU MEMBERS

Dear comrades,

There is an urgent task facing the working class and labour movement, the tackling of which can no longer be postponed. That task is the necessity to rebuild the political independence of the working class.

In the mining sector strike wave of last year the NUM, the ANC, the SACP, nor the Cosatu leadership supported the mineworkers, forcing them to organise independent strike committees to lead their dispute. In recognition of this political vacuum and in the wake of the Marikana massacre, the mineworkers strike committees have taken the initiative to launch a new political party – the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP). This decision and the events of last year require every Cosatu member to reflect and critically examine the course that the present leadership of the once mighty Cosatu federation has embarked upon. Why is it that the backbone of the working class – the mineworkers – are breaking from the Tripartite Alliance?

WASP would like to raise the following points:

(1) The Marikana massacre has conclusively exposed the capitalist character of the Alliance.

Marikana was an atrocity that attempted to drown working class struggle in blood, carried out under a democratically elected government that claims to represent the very same working class. Marikana illuminated with blinding clarity the class character of the ANC leadership and the irreconcilable antagonism between the interests of this capitalist government and the working class on whose backs it came to power. Whilst proclaiming itself as a government of all the people, it is in reality a government of the capitalist class alone.

The strike wave in the mining industry last year saw the classes in SA line up in opposition: the working class majority with the mineworkers to the fore on the one side and the capitalist class with the mining bosses to the fore on the other. Whilst the mineworkers had the rest of the working class to call upon as its allies, the bosses relied on the forces of the capitalist state, its police and its appendages in the judiciary and the National Prosecuting Authority.

(2) From its inception, the Alliance was made up of incompatible social forces. The resolution of this contradiction would require either the ANC to abandon its commitment to preserving capitalism, or Cosatu to renounce its commitment to socialism.

Since 1994, the capitalist ANC and the SACP has required Cosatu to surrender its political, and therefore class, independence. The Tripartite Alliance was entered into on a false political basis: the

idea that all “progressive forces” could be united under the leadership of the ANC to ensure it obtained an overwhelming parliamentary majority. The purpose of which, was to clear the path for a thoroughgoing transformation of society through the utilisation of state resources to address the problems of jobs, decent wages and conditions, housing, education, health and decent services.

But the fifth column in this “alliance of progressive forces” was the ANC itself. The ANC was born to promote the development of a black capitalist class. It was always committed to the preservation of the capitalist economic system managed until 1994 by the apartheid regime. On the other hand, the aspirations of the working class forces which brought Cosatu into existence could be fulfilled only by breaking with that system.

The evidence of the last nineteen years is indisputable. The interests of the capitalist class have been triumphant and have formed the basis of ANC rule. Commencing with the abandonment of the Freedom Charter, the adoption of Gear, and culminating in the renunciation of nationalisation at Mangaung, the ascendancy of the interests of capital could not be more complete. Majority rule has served as a mask to conceal and legitimise the economic dictatorship of the capitalist minority.

(3) These contradictions in the Alliance are leading to Cosatu being stripped of any real power or influence within the Alliance.

Mbeki has been accused of having stripped the ANC of power and concentrated it in the presidency. Amongst the objectives of the Zuma coalition was the restoration of the sovereignty of the party over the government. They relocated the centre of decision-making from the Union Buildings to Luthuli House as part of the process of returning the party to its working class roots.

But Zuma enters his second term as ANC president with firm control of the two centres of power established under Mbeki. Cosatu’s struggle to make the Alliance Secretariat the strategic centre has failed as it was bound to. Reacting to Cosatu’s outrage over the special cabinet committee’s decision to implement e-tolling in disregard of the Alliance Secretariat’s agreement to put it on hold, ANC deputy president Kgalema Motlanthe dismissed the agreement, and therefore the Alliance Secretariat in the most contemptible fashion. This is the same Motlanthe the Vavi camp supported as an alternative to Zuma! The Marikana massacre was carried out under a government led by Zuma whose accession to power would not have been possible but for the critical role Cosatu played.

(4) The Vavi ‘scandal’ represents the latest attempt by the capitalist class to replicate the grip they hold over the ANC within Cosatu

The allegations against Cosatu general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, are a serious escalation in the political crisis that has gripped Cosatu over the last period. Should the allegations be true, it would expose him as a hypocrite who has posed as an anti-corruption crusader whilst lining his pockets. It would destroy the credibility of Corruption Watch and do irreparable damage to Cosatu itself.

However, whatever the merits of the allegations, there can be little doubt that the motive for making them is not to fight corruption, but to pursue the factional aims of the pro-Zuma clique in the Cosatu leadership. Vavi’s accusers are brazen hypocrites. The howling pack of wolves is led by the darling of the mining bosses, the NUM, and the leadership of Popcru, which is embroiled in corruption with over R8m of its investment arm unaccounted for. Emboldened by the Zuma faction’s landslide victory at the ANC’s Mangaung conference, and politically empowered by their elevation into the ANC NEC, Cosatu’s pro-Zuma leaders now want to tighten theirs and the ANC’s grip on the federation.

Should they succeed in ousting Vavi, it would not end the corruption that has infected many Cosatu affiliates. On the contrary, it would merely accelerate the slow-motion disintegration of the federation itself. At the end of this road lies the stamping out of what little is left of Cosatu’s radical

traditions, the obliteration of even the memory of its class independence. Cosatu will emerge fully transformed from a pro-socialist force into a pro-capitalist lackey of an unashamedly pro-big business government.

(5) Cosatu's continued membership of the Alliance is ripping up its anchor of class independence and socialist traditions and leading it down the road of class collaboration.

The Cosatu leadership has found itself embracing the idea of reforming capitalism instead of campaigning for its abolition. This is coming at an enormous cost. Repeating on the economic plane the error it committed on the political, Cosatu has entered into an alliance with the Manufacturers Circle against Finance Capital over monetary policy and interest rates. By taking sides in a quarrel amongst capitalists the Cosatu leadership are behaving like sheep taking sides in a quarrel amongst butchers about the best way to slaughter them.

Another consequence of the abandonment of Cosatu's socialist traditions is that it has been infected by the virus of corruption, the life blood of capitalism. Even worse, union leaders increasingly look at the world through the spectacles of the capitalist class. The NUM's denunciation of the victorious Lonmin settlement is but the worst example of this. But it is not the only one. Sactwu is now rueing the consequences of its agreement to lower the already miserly entry level salaries in the clothing and textile industry under the incredible pretext that it would lead to more job creation! There is a widespread belief amongst the Communication Workers Union membership that the leadership's failure to enforce an agreement for labour broker employees to be absorbed by the post office is due to the CWU leaders investments in the labour broking industry. So serious is the problem of the ideological degeneration of the unions that the Cosatu leadership was prepared to contemplate the sanctioning of the spilling of workers blood in the campaign to force workers to remain members the NUM and to march on Rustenburg to "reclaim it from the hands of counter-revolutionaries."

The inevitable consequence of this compromise with capitalist ideology is that the even the pretence at a principle -- that unions should not invest in the industries in which they are organised -- has now been abandoned. Reflecting the Cosatu leadership's lack of confidence in socialism, the establishment of investment companies is now official policy. The result has been the emergence of trade union millionaires and the subordination of the provision of basic services to members to the enrichment of union leaders. The NUM has gone as far as partnering the mining bosses in exploiting their own members by investing in the Teba bank whose primary clients are mineworkers. The latest convert to the idea of investing in the same industries as they organise, Numsa, the union with the most left wing ideological tradition, has not just capitulated to this idea, but has attempted to justify it politically.

(6) Cosatu's failure in the Alliance is forcing the working class to begin the task of rebuilding their political independence without, and often in opposition to, Cosatu. This process has begun and cannot be halted. Cosatu has to decide whose side it is on – their survival depends upon it.

Cosatu was the spinal column of the working class army that defeated apartheid. Virtually alone amongst trade unions internationally it boldly defended socialism in the past giving it credibility amongst workers well beyond its formal membership. Now a once great organ of working class struggle has been fatally compromised ideologically, divided politically and stands on the precipice of disintegration. The establishment of the independent strike committees by the mineworkers represents the most important political development since the founding of Cosatu. In turning their backs on the NUM the mineworkers took the first step toward re-establishing the independence of the working class. **The strike committees have the potential to be the foundation for a new trade union federation.**

The gulf between Cosatu's rank-and-file and the leadership is revealed in the survey of shop stewards political views commissioned by Cosatu and Undertaken by the Forum for Public Dialogue. This survey of 2,000 shop stewards revealed a majority in support of nationalisation, that there was no confidence in the SACP, that Zuma's re-election as ANC president was opposed and that if Cosatu were to take the step of forming a labour party, members would support it. This survey was suppressed!

Storm clouds gather ominously over the SA economy. Given the continued world-wide capitalist crisis, the bosses will attempt to offload the costs of the crisis onto the shoulders of the working class. The government will come under increasing pressure to cut public spending by holding down workers' wages whilst allowing astronomical increases in fuel prices and the enforcing of e-tolls against popular opposition. The certainty of class confrontation is apparent at every turn: a show down with the public sector over wages is inevitable; the campaign to declare teaching an essential service (alongside health, the prisons service and policing); the incessant denunciation of the public sector wage bill (read public servants are overpaid); the attempt to deprive soldiers of the right to belong to a trade union; the repeated attacks on the alleged inflexibility of the labour market; the defence of the Reserve Bank's "independence", in the promotion of the neo-liberal NDP, the Secrecy Bill and the Traditional Courts Bill. **Whose side will Cosatu be on in these inevitable conflicts?**

(7) The launching of the Workers and Socialist Party (WASP) by the mineworkers strike committees is the inevitable outcome of the ANC failing the working class and Cosatu's refusal to do anything about it. We appeal to the Cosatu rank-and-file to join us in re-building the independence of the working class in order to struggle for a socialist future.

The decision of the mineworkers national strike committee to form WASP is fully in step with the views of Cosatu members. WASP will promote working class solidarity in struggle, campaign for the recall of corrupt councillors and subject all elected leaders to trade union and political office to immediate recall and the principle of a worker's representative on a worker's wage. WASP will fill the vacuum that exists on the left, boldly proclaim socialism and, as in the 1980s, re-unite the struggles of the working class in order to prepare the way for the abolition of capitalism the establishment of a workers government and the socialist transformation of society.

We call upon the Cosatu rank-and-file to form workplace committees to re-establish workers' control over leaders and over the manner in which struggles are conducted. We call on the Cosatu rank-and-file to form workplace and trade union based WASP supporters groups and send delegates to the launch of WASP on March 21.