

4 perspectives

Has the “Numsa moment” passed?

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's, (Numsa) December 2013 Special National Congress was historic. In announcing that it would not campaign for the ANC in the 2014 general elections, denouncing the SA Communist Party and withholding its Cosatu subscription, Numsa took the first political step on to the other side of the historic fault line created by the Marikana massacre. It meant the end of Cosatu's historical role as the political centre of the working class, the demise of the Tripartite Alliance and cleared the way for a political alternative for the working class. The “Numsa moment” had arrived.

Weizmann Hamilton

The SNC adopted resolutions committing Numsa to building a United Front (UF), Movement for Socialism (MfS) and a workers party to be launched in time for the 2016 local government elections. Three years later, unfortunately, none of these have been built. It is now legitimate to ask the question: has the “Numsa moment” passed?

Well before the SNC, WASP contributed towards the debates in Numsa, supporting its efforts to have Cosatu reclaim its political and class independence. But we pointed out that Cosatu's degeneration had developed to the point that reclaiming its original traditions of solidarity, workers control and socialism would require a new federation. We argued that the main strategic task was the creation of a mass workers party on a socialist programme to unify the working class within and across the three main theatres of struggle – in the service delivery protests, in the struggles of tertiary education students and in the workplace.

We supported the proposed role of the United Front as the unifier of community and workplace struggles and that of the Movement for Socialism to unite all the left formations seeing in this the assembling of the forces for a mass workers party.



Numsa members protest against the youth wage subsidy in 2014

We were conscious of the fact that the Numsa leadership had received their “socialist” education in the SACP's Stalinist school for the falsification of Marxism. But to have stood aside from these developments and criticise from the sidelines would have been the height of sectarianism. It would have meant turning our backs not only on the workers in Numsa, but the millions of workers outside both it and Cosatu looking for direction towards their political and class emancipation from the political prison of the Tripartite Alliance.

As Marx pointed out, we have to look to the lines of struggle calculated to move decisive sectors of the class into action – into movement against the established powers of the system (state, the bourgeoisie and their agents including the labour lieutenants inside the workers' movement). Every genuine democrat and socialist had a duty to contribute towards the efforts to ensure the SNC fulfilled its political potential and this historic opportunity was seized.

Whilst criticising the Numsa leadership, we participated in efforts to bring the UF and MfS to life, linking up with

unions that had broken from Cosatu to support the initiative for a new socialist trade union federation. We called upon Numsa to take its rightful place in WASP and to occupy a position within it that corresponds to its size and political weight within the working class – a call, in other words for Numsa to take over WASP even if that meant that we would be a minority within it.

Despite the leadership's prejudices against Trotskyism, WASP was warmly welcomed by Numsa workers and shop stewards, recognised as a “friend of Numsa” and was the only party given speaking rights at the SNC 2014 elections commission. We warned that it was a mistake for Numsa to delay the workers party's launch to 2016. This was to demand that history should march not to its own rhythm but to Numsa's drumbeat. The 2014 elections demanded that a workers party be launched immediately. Cosatu's 2012 shop steward political survey showed overwhelming support – 67% - for a workers party even before Marikana.

Failure to launch immediately would mean the loss of an historic opportunity. Numsa could not turn the hands of the

clock of history. Should Numsa block the historic process from flowing through it, history would find another conduit. The SNC 2014 elections commission unanimously supported our proposal that the SNC should advise workers to vote for a party whose programme conformed to their criteria to evaluate new political formations. Although WASP met these criteria – it is working class, democratic, socialist with a track record of struggle – Numsa limited itself to ruling out Agang and the EFF, remaining silent on WASP. Unfortunately the commission's recommendation that the proposal be referred to plenary was overruled, the chairperson arguing that it would amount to calling for a vote for WASP.

WASP retained its orientation to Numsa after the 2014 elections. But the leadership stood in the path of the implementation of the SNC resolutions on the UF, MfS and the workers party. The leadership opposed the UF adopting socialism as its ideology, made it clear that it was not to consider itself a political party and encouraged it strongly to adopt the Freedom Charter as its programme. At the same time the UF leadership was allowed to fall into the hands of a largely ideologically demoralised middle class leadership hostile to socialism, far removed from the working class and unable to connect with service delivery protests or link them to the organised labour movement.

We warned that the imposition of the Freedom Charter would be divisive, arguing that the best way to overcome the divisions between the pro- and anti-Freedom Charter positions would be to acknowledge, as Numsa had done, that it was not a socialist programme but to extract from it those elements compatible with transitional socialist demands, like nationalisation, free education, housing and health and a 40-hour working week thus converting it into a Socialist Freedom Charter.

In all the provinces UF structures voted overwhelmingly for socialism. Faced with the loss of ideological control, the leadership repeatedly postponed the launch of the UF until it led to demoralisation. It is of the greatest significance that very few Numsa members and shop stewards bothered to attend UF meetings throughout, ignoring all appeals by the leadership. There are no UF structures on the ground today. All that is left of it is the National Coordinating Committee – a head without a body. The UF has been left to wither on the vine of malign neglect.

The MfS conference, when eventually called, resolved to establish a steering committee to work out a roadmap

towards the launch of a workers party. WASP's proposal that such a party should be a mass workers party on a socialist programme and should contest the elections, with the election of all representatives subject to the right of recall and an income limited to that of the average wage of a skilled worker, was agreed unanimously. The Numsa leadership simply ignored the resolution and failed to convene the steering committee. They unilaterally established a MfS Media Committee which started producing an online journal with the Stalinist ideological line supported by the Numsa leadership. This was done without any consultation with the Left formations that had participated in the MfS conference.

The leadership has ensured that the resolution on a workers party does not escape from the central committee where, starved of the oxygen of open democratic debate within the membership and with left forces in the MfS, it is trapped in a sterile, meaningless disagreement over whether it should be a "mass" or "vanguard" party. The dominant Stalinist faction in the Numsa leadership is instead campaigning for the outlandish idea that the workers party will be built by 100 hand-picked shop stewards – the "Red One Hundred" who will be schooled in "Marxism" through "cadre" schools from where they will presumably emerge with certificates to present themselves to the working class as leaders of a party that workers have had no role in creating. To invite the Chinese Communist Party – a one party totalitarian dictatorship committed to the restoration of capitalism – and Samir Amin who argued that socialism is off the agenda for a thousand and possibly two thousand years – demonstrates a light mindedness on something as important as theory.

The formation of new trade union federation is an objective necessity precipitated by Numsa's expulsion. But we are concerned that the ideological confusion and political methods of the Numsa leadership will handicap the new federation's potential.

The Numsa mountain has roared... and produced a mouse. The sum total of the SNC resolution is a UF head without a body; the MfS replaced by a media committee that meets every Monday morning to read the bourgeois press to identify issues to write articles on... for the bourgeois press; the workers party to be formed from the top by the "Red Hundred" graduates of a school of dubious Marxism who will initiate the formation of a workers party from the top; and the "Numsa nine" reduced to two.

The Numsa leadership's approach to the SNC resolutions has its origins in their ideological commitment to the Stalinist ideas of the SACP which have fatally contaminated all three SNC initiatives. Their stubborn adherence to the notion that the National Democratic Revolution is the shortest road to socialism is merely the reincarnation of the discredited two-stage theory that has resulted in catastrophic defeats for the workers revolution internationally in China, 1925-27, in splitting the working class in Germany clearing the path to power of Hitler and the horrors of the Second World War, the defeat of the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39, the genocidal decimation of the Indonesian Communist party in 1965 with the slaughter of over one million communists and trade unionists, the triumph of Pinochet in Chile 1973 and last but not least the betrayal of the working class in SA over the past 22 years.

To argue that socialism will come later is to raise the question as to which class will be in power in the meantime under the so-called "national democratic" regime. A revolution that sets itself the task of establishing "national democracy" before workers democracy and socialism can have the practical result only of the preservation of the dictatorship of the capitalist class – a regime that would differ from its predecessor only in name. Far from such a "national democratic revolution" constituting the "shortest road to socialism", it will become a gigantic fortress from the walls of which the cannons of the same national democratic regime will be trained on the working class.

What in essence would be the difference between a NDR regime and the one of the past twenty two years? For all their strident denunciation of the SACP, the Numsa leadership is charging it with failing to vigorously implement a bankrupt programme. The Numsa leadership's real aim is a "Herstigte" SACP – the true defenders of the Stalinist faith.

From bankrupt ideas flow false methods. In keeping with Stalinist traditions the leadership has ensured that it maintains an iron grip on the formations that the SNC resolutions envisaged to ensure that no ideas that question theirs is tolerated.

As the ANC implodes, the need for a mass workers party has become even more urgent. It has the potential for providing a home for hundreds of thousands of workers and may have been delayed by Numsa's abdication of its historic responsibility, but it remains firmly on the agenda. WASP will continue to contribute towards its establishment.