

# SAFTU must support a Mass socialist workers party

**The launch of Saftu (SA Federation of Trade Unions) is taking place in the most turbulent period in post-apartheid history. The 7 and 12 April 2017 anti-Zuma protests attracted 100,000 nationwide and 40,000 in Tshwane alone. Mobilisations on this scale were last seen in the 1980s and 90s against the apartheid regime.**

## Weizmann Hamilton Executive Committee

Superimposed on the general political crisis is a deep economic crisis now enormously aggravated by the rating agency downgrade. Having never recovered from the 2008 global Great Recession that claimed a million jobs, the SA economy now faces its worst post-apartheid crisis.

The capitalist ruling class is united on the “solutions” to the crisis. This includes, as Dawie Roodt of the Efficient Group argues, the need “to cut the civil service; .... privatise state-owned enterprises ... review land restitution and labour policies, and much more.” (Businesslive 14/04/17).

This amounts to a manifesto for an escalation of the class war against working people under the ANC government’s capitalist economic policy in its various guises: RDP, GEAR, AsgiSA and the NDP since apartheid’s end.

### The balance of class forces

How does the working class stand in the face of the coming bosses’ offensive? The balance of power in the workplace has swung in favour of the bosses over the past twenty years. This is reflected in the decline of wages as a percentage of total national income from 54% in 1994 to 46% today. The level of unionisation has declined from 46% at its height in the 1990s to 26%. Fully 74% of workers are not unionised. But formal unionisation levels are only part of the story. For example, in 1988 trade union membership was only around 30% and this was at the height of the state of emergency and the struggle against apartheid. In 1987 more than six million ‘man-days’ were lost in strike action showing that even an organised minority of the working class can have a decisive impact.

On the political plain the working class has no mass organised political force of its own. The illusion that workers had a voice in government through the Tripartite Alliance has finally been shattered by Cosatu’s expulsion of Numsa. The Alliance was a political prison for the working class.

WASP believes, however, that the wrong conclusions have been drawn from this experience by both the leaders of the former Cosatu unions in the new federation, and those who were politically unaffiliated. If the Alliance proved to be a trap for Cosatu it was because it was a partnership with the capitalist ANC.

For the ANC the Alliance was necessary to deprive the organised workers of their political and therefore their class independence – to use Cosatu to line the working class up behind its historical aim – the creation of a black capitalist class. Thus whereas the logic of Cosatu’s socialist traditions required the overthrow of capitalism, the National Democratic Revolution required its preservation.

The logic of this division of political labour obliged the Cosatu leadership to hold back workers also in their day-to-day struggles. As late arrivals on the scene of history a black capitalist class could develop only through privatisation, corporatisation, contracting, labour broking and their cooption as junior partners in the preservation of capitalism through BEE. All of this necessitated systemically undermining workers’ wages and conditions. The irreconcilable contradiction between the interests of the working class and those of the aspirant black capitalist class doomed the Alliance to failure for workers.

### “Independent but not apolitical”?

In an effort to avoid a similar trap, the Saftu leadership has proposed that the new federation should be “independent but not apolitical”. We believe this policy is seriously mistaken if it means anything other than building a socialist mass workers party. Cosatu’s entire pre-and post-apartheid history demonstrates the interconnectedness of politics and economics. Politics, Lenin taught us, is concentrated economics.

Cosatu’s birth represented far more than just the emergence of the most powerful force for workers unity in the workplace in SA history. It signaled the arrival of a new political power on the terrain of the struggle for national liberation. Even more important was the socialist consciousness particularly of Cosatu’s advanced layer. From the experience of fighting the same state machine enslaving them in the workplace and enforcing their political subjugation through apartheid, the workers drew the conclusion that capitalism and the state are two sides of the same bloody coin.

### Need for a socialist mass workers party

One of the most striking features of the current political conjuncture is the absence of the forces of the organised working class in the anti-Zuma protests. In response to the inter-capitalist conflict, Professor Chris Malikane, advisor to new Finance Minister Malusi Gigaba, laments that the “black capitalist class is not likely to win this battle (against white monopoly capital) without the support of the mass of the black working class”. He calls for the establishment of a “broad anti-white monopoly capitalist united front made up of all the classes.” With customary SACP-style revolutionary pretensions Malikane calls for widespread nationalisation of the banks and insurance companies, not to bury capitalism, but to strengthen the corrupt, impotent black capitalists. The black working class is called upon to ally with the black capitalists as their slaves rather than those of the whites.

Fedusa’s refusal to support the pathetic R3,500 minimum wage championed by deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa, shows that its “independence” from political affiliation has not inoculated it from the influence of the capitalist class.

Being “independent but not apolitical” amounts to an abstention from the class struggle whose economic and political fronts are not separated by a Chinese Wall, but are inextricably bound up with each other. Saftu can protect its class and political independence only by supporting the formation of a socialist mass workers party thus ensuring that such a party’s programme and ideology is compatible with the interests of the working class.