

As ANC's crisis deepens, a mass socialist workers party is now even more urgent

The Workers and Socialist Party welcomes metalworkers' union NUMSA's 2018 New Year statement on a workers party. The call to help build such a party could not have been more timely. It comes against the background of a conference that has split the ANC down the middle. This was arguably the ANC's most convincing demonstration of its incapacity to provide leadership to society. The factional civil war that broke out in every province in the run up to its 54th national conference is far from over following the stalemate at 'Naswreck'. The ANC is being torn apart by factions holding on to each other only because the alternative will almost certainly mean the end of the ANC as a governing party in the 2019 elections.

Executive Committee statement

It is not certain for how much longer the ANC – in reality at least two rival gangs locked in a blood-feud within one organisational shell – can remain a single entity. Ramaphosa's repeated post-conference promises to make "unity" the ANC's 2018 theme is a desperate attempt to overcome the paralysis inherent in the factional stalemate that brought the ANC to the edge of collapse.

If both factions eventually agree that Zuma must go, it will only be because an ANC headed by him faces the likelihood of defeat in 2019. The prospect of losing their grip on the levers of state power for self-enrichment outweighs the Zuma faction's loyalty to their factional figurehead. With the end of his term as president of the country to follow on the defeat of his preferred candidate at the conference, Zuma is now a lame duck. The Zuma faction needs him to go now for the same reason that they needed him in power – to loot. Despite this, it is by no means guaranteed that the pro-Zuma faction will agree. They would be inclined to demand immunity from prosecution; something it would be virtually impossible for Ramaphosa to grant without damaging his own "anti-corruption" credentials.

The ANC must go with Zuma

The outcome of the ANC conference must be interpreted as a public admission that it has forfeited the right to govern the country. It is demanding to be removed. It is time the working class took its rightful place at the head of society.

The leadership of the working class has until now not been as conscientious in responding to the rapidly changing political situation as the strategists of capital have been. Whilst the strategists

of capital have been feverishly at work to preserve political control of their system there has been far too much dithering on our side.

The NUMSA Special National Congress (SNC) workers party resolution of 2013, for example, set the launch date to enable the workers party to stand in the 2016 local government elections. Saftu has yet to implement the resolution taken at its launch conference to discuss the workers party question.

Build Workers Party to unite working class struggles

But "agteros kom ook in die kraal" (the ox that lags last eventually also enters the kraal). This is why the NUMSA statement calling for the building of a workers party is of such crucial importance. Now that NUMSA has made this call it is the duty of all activists, leaders in the workplace, in education and communities, to take this as a signal to catch up with a rapidly developing political crisis.

Despite lagging behind politically, the working class has not been cowed into submission by the total onslaught on their living standards, wages and jobs. SA has amongst the highest rates of protest per head of population in the world. Although Zuma's motives for announcing free education at the ANC's December conference were factional, the fact is that it is a major concession wrung from the state by the courage and determination of students in the #FeesMustFall movement. The birth of Saftu in 2017 also represented an important step forward in the renovation of the organised working class movement.

The working class' biggest weakness is the disunity of its forces both within each of the individual theatres of struggle – communities, educational institutions and the workplace – as well as across them. Of course the workers party cannot substitute itself for the unity that needs to be forged within each theatre of struggle. Efforts to unify each of them separately must continue. But a mass workers party will provide the priceless advantage of providing an overarching unity and act as a central organising centre.

The unification of the struggles of the working class within and across the #FeesMustFall movement, community struggles and the new federation must therefore be the first order of business for the workers party. It must be built as a party of action engaging in struggles to promote working class unity.

Unite #FeesMustFall

There can be no room for complacency for the #FeesMustFall movement. Already Zuma's concession is a 'hot potato' for the

ruling class. However, it will be very difficult for them to ‘cancel’ the announcement without provoking a new wave of protests. We can be sure that they will work tirelessly to water-down what “free education” means. Only determined struggles by the students, supported by workers and communities, can ensure that free education becomes a reality.

The capitalist media is busy whipping up a frenzy on the question of how free education will be paid for. Their propaganda claims the money can only come by cutting other government spending, for example by cutting social grants, house building, and service delivery, or by retrenching public sector workers. If this does not happen they ‘warn’ – in reality repeating the threats of the imperialist capitalist class and their ratings agencies – South Africa will spiral down to economic ruin. They did the same before the new minimum wage was announced, falsely claiming it will automatically lead to massive job losses.

To answer this propaganda it is necessary to be able to offer a clear alternative. If capitalism means free education and decent wages are impossible then the only alternative must be to break with capitalism and build a democratic socialist society – a society that is run by the working class in the interests of workers, the poor, the unemployed and the youth. By nationalising the banks, the mines, the commercial farms, the big factories and big businesses, and placing them under democratic working class control, the wealth can be made available to transform living standards. A democratic socialist plan of production to invest that wealth can ensure well-paid jobs, high quality homes, excellent service delivery and free education for all. Such measures are also the basis to answer the threats of the ratings agencies and the potential economic sabotage of the bosses that are guided by them.

But we must face up to the reality that the #FeesMustFall movement is not yet ideologically, programmatically and organisationally coherent. A national #FeesMustFall assembly is now an urgent necessity. The aim of such an assembly would be to place the #FeesMustFall movement on a countrywide organisational footing, uniting all universities, drawing in tertiary education institutions like TVET colleges as well as high schools. A united student movement would be able to engage the organised labour movement and communities as part of a process to build a mass workers party.

Community struggles

According to monitoring body, Municipal IQ, there is one service delivery protest ever second day. This figure is conservative as it excludes explicitly political protests such as the Vuyani demands for municipal boundary re-demarcation or for the removal of councillors. The fact that service delivery protests are around the same demands means that it should be possible to develop a common platform, a common programme of action and to establish a leadership structure to coordinate service delivery protests on a regional, provincial and national level. Out of this can emerge a mass socialist civic uniting struggles across the country.

Saftu

The birth of Saftu represented an important step forward. The political degeneration of Cosatu has resulted in the absorption of its leadership into the capitalist political elite, exposed it to rampant corruption and resulted in it turning its back on the intensified exploitation of the working class through casualization, labour broking, contracting, etc. Saftu’s ambitious membership targets can be achieved should it pour its resources into organising

this growing army of the precariat as #OutsourcingMustFall has demonstrated.

The birth of Saftu was necessitated not just by Cosatu’s incapacity to represent worker interest in the workplace. Its birth represents an attempt to restore the original political basis on which Cosatu was established. Cosatu came into being as far more than a trade union. It was founded on the understanding that the struggle in the workplace is inseparably bound up with the struggle on the political plane – that the struggle against exploitation by the bosses was inextricably linked to the struggle for national liberation. Cosatu’s political authority derived from the fact that it was the spinal column of the workers army that ultimately brought down the apartheid regime. For a whole period, Cosatu was a substitute for the workers party that the SACP and ANC prevented from developing.

Cosatu’s incarceration in the Tripartite Alliance led inevitably to betrayals also on the political plane. Obligated to defend the ANC despite its neo-liberal offensive on the working class, Cosatu has been reduced to no more than a corrupt political appendage of the capitalist ANC. From its greatest betrayal – that of the mineworkers in 2012 – followed logically Cosatu’s support today for the butcher of Marikana – Ramaphosa as ANC president.

But there has been no mass exodus from Cosatu into Saftu yet nor has it been flooded by the multi-millioned precariat – the 74% of workers not yet organised. The reason for this is that Saftu has yet to demonstrate that it is based on the original, militant, socialist political traditions of Cosatu – the Cosatu of 1985. Saftu’s policy that it is “independent but not apolitical” is based on the mistaken notion that workplace struggles and political contestation are unrelated and that abstention from politics will protect the new federation’s independence.

Cosatu’s error did not consist in principle in the fact that it was in an alliance with a political party. Its error was to enter an alliance with a capitalist party. Trade union independence is not guaranteed by not having alliances with political parties. Despite Fedusa and Nactu’s party-political “independence” they agreed, along with Cosatu, to the labour law amendments attacking the right to strike and to Ramaphosa’s minimum slave wage.

These missiles are being launched on behalf of the bosses through their main political agent – the ANC – from parliament. There was no independent working class voice to oppose them. Parliament is a site of class struggle. To abstain from party politics is to surrender the class struggle in advance, leaving the political terrain to the parties of the bosses. The working class majority is thus agreeing to submit itself to the dictatorship of the infinitesimally small capitalist minority.

Saftu can protect its independence only by placing itself in the forefront of building a workers party, ensuring it adopts a programme and political policy reflecting the interest of the working class and which it can thus earn the right to hold to account. Saftu must ensure that it implements with urgency its founding conference resolutions to finalise the debates on the workers party.

Both Cope and EFF were able to obtain more than a million votes in elections within 12 months of their birth. There is no reason why a mass workers party, especially one created through mass action, especially against the background of the deepest political crisis of the ANC, should not exceed those achievements.

Saftu must support NUMSA’s workers party call

If NUMSA’s delay on the workers party question has acted as a

brake on the building of a party to enable the working class to enter the political arena independently, it is unfortunately not possible to say that Saftu has been an accelerator. Little has been done on the implementation of the launch congress resolutions to develop a programme with the appropriate structures to finalise the new federation's position on the workers party.

But now that NUMSA has issued the call, we believe that Saftu must step up its internal processes. In Saftu's New Year statement there is no reference at all to a workers party despite an emphatic and correct declaration that none of the ANC's factions are capable of providing a way forward out of the impasse in society. In media interviews afterwards Saftu general secretary Vavi limited himself to saying that Saftu had not yet taken a position for or against a workers party.

We recognise that it would be undemocratic for Vavi to pronounce on the question without a mandate derived from a democratic debate amongst all affiliates. But there is nothing that prevented comrade Vavi from pointing out that the ANC's conference has deepened the vacuum on the left, has underlined the fact that the ANC represents various wings of the capitalist party, has exhausted the political capital of its liberation credentials. Comrade Vavi could have declared that it was time for the working class to take its political destiny into its own hands and to publicly commit to ensuring that the launching conference resolutions are acted upon with urgency. Comrade Vavi could have and can still use his colossal authority to express himself in favour of a workers party in his personal capacity.

Mobilise to build the workers party

We believe that the formation of detachments of workers, youth and community activists should be formed as soon as possible to set up pre-party structures in every province. These steps must be seen as preparation for the launch of the party through an assembly for working class unity as soon as possible. There is little more than a year left before the 2019 general elections. Concrete preparations for the assembling of the forces for the workers party and its launch must proceed with urgency.

If Saftu links their planned Section 77 socio-economic strike – what they have called “the mother of all strikes” – to preparations for a new party, appealing to communities and students to participate in both, we believe there would be tremendous enthusiasm.

Clarity needed on character of the party

It is in this context that WASP believes clarity is needed on parts of NUMSA's statement. Ever since the idea of a mass workers party first made its appearance in NUMSA, a debate has been raging over whether the workers party should be a “vanguard” or a “mass” party – a debate we have always argued, falsely counterposes one to the other. Since the internal NUMSA debates have not been opened to Saftu or the wider working class, it is not clear what the outcome of that debate has been. What appears to have happened is that the issue has been resolved by a forced marriage between the two concepts. The statement speaks of the need to build a “mass vanguard party led by professional revolutionaries”.

We do not believe this has overcome the original problem created by the contradiction the leadership appeared to believe existed between two concepts: “mass” and “vanguard”. From having regarded them as mutually exclusive, the leadership appears to have settled on the idea that they are compatible after all. Unfortunately the lumping together of the two concepts as in a marriage where partners agree to bear each other's surnames, does

not resolve the question of the party's organisational character, its internal regime, its relationship with the broader working class and, above all its programme.

Does this mean for example that the graduates of NUMSA's political school for the “red one hundred” shop stewards have been pre-selected to constitute the general staff of “professional revolutionaries” of the party? Have party structures already been established? If so what is the nature of these structures? How, when and by whom were they established? To whom are they accountable?

We are concerned that to call upon workers just to join without having had the opportunity to participate in the debate about the most appropriate structures and without the right to elect the leaders is not the correct approach. It sends the unintended message that the NUMSA leadership does not have confidence in workers democracy or in engaging with activists in the wider working class on these critical issues. It creates the unfortunate impression that the leadership trusts only their own judgements and understanding of theory, organisational methods, strategies and tactics.

It opens up the NUMSA leadership to the accusation that instead of allowing the party to come into being through the organised activity of ordinary workers and youth, it is imposing a pre-frabricated party structure complete with a pre-installed party leadership of “professional revolutionaries.” It would reinforce fears that even if the leadership has broken with the SACP as a party political formation, it continues to adhere to the organisational culture of the SACP. The SACP is notorious for arrogating to itself the title of “vanguard of the working class” as its only authentic voice without the consent or participation of the working class itself in the building of the party.

The party NUMSA is championing will, in our view, even as a mass force, draw in the best, most developed and experienced activists – the “vanguard” as in the guiding layers of the class, of a party that itself will be the organisational “vanguard” of the tens of millions that it has the potential to draw behind it.

What are the tasks facing a workers party?

Truth is concrete as Lenin never tired of reminding us. What are the tasks that concretely face the working class in SA today? The Tripartite Alliance is in political ruins, shattered, in the final analysis by the conflict of the irreconcilable class interests between the capitalist ANC and the socialist Cosatu it housed. This conflict reached its historical breaking point during the Marikana massacre as represented by the capitalist ANC on the one hand, and the organised workers on the other. But Marikana itself did not spring out of clear blue sky. It was the culmination of subterranean processes of class differentiation and conflict that placed a limited life-span on this post-apartheid class collaborationist arrangement. It was based on a division of labour in which Cosatu's role was to subordinate the interests of the workers to those of the capitalist ANC elite.

As early as 1998, that is before the end of the ANC's very first term, the Cosatu survey on shop steward's political attitudes found that 30% favoured the formation of a workers party to stand against the ANC in the 1994 elections. At that stage the “vanguard” of the working class was in fact organised as Cosatu. It had developed a growing understanding that the ANC represented different antagonistic class interests from the working class. By 2012 this substantial minority had grown to an overwhelming majority of 67%. NUMSA's SNC resolutions were therefore entirely in step with the views of the majority of the “vanguard”.

There is no shortage of combativity in the working class as the service delivery protests, student protests and workplace struggles tell us on a daily basis. What is absent is a unifying centre of struggle, an engine to compress the energies of the entire working class. Prior to Cosatu's political demise, it played that role unifying workplace and community struggles. The adoption of the SNC resolutions were a reflection of the conclusion not just of NUMSA workers but of the working class as a whole. The ANC's crisis has merely underscored this fact.

We look forward to getting answers to these critical questions. But we will participate enthusiastically in building the party all the same and raise these issues with comrades from both inside NUMSA and in the broader working class movement. We are confident the NUMSA leadership will encourage the establishment of forums to tap into the energies of all comrades committed to the building of such a party. In the meantime we wish to contribute towards the discussions our concept of the type of party that is needed.

What type of party do we need?

We believe that including a federal component in the structure of a new party will be very important. This would allow existing working class formations – community structures, trade unions, workers' committees, youth groups, political formations etc. – to work together without the fear of being swallowed up and losing their political identity. The detail of exactly how this would work in practice can be debated. But what it must allow is space for fraternal democratic debate about which ideas can take the working class forward; by being united under one umbrella these ideas can then be tested in practice in the struggle – we can abandon what does not work and adopt what does.

The workers party programme

The NUMSA leadership has proposed that the workers party programme be based on the Freedom Charter. The FC has a number of progressive clauses. These include nationalisation of the banks, mines, mills and farms as well as the call for a 35 hour week amongst others. But as the leadership has itself acknowledged, the FC is not a socialist programme. Even the nationalisation clauses do not have the necessary qualification NUMSA SNC conference documents criticised the EFF for – workers control.

As a document written to accommodate the variety of class forces present – capitalists, petty bourgeois intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, tradesmen, workers – urban and rural, including trade unionists – the document attempted to be all things to all people. It makes reference neither to capitalism nor socialism. It is in that sense a reformist document that sows the illusion that the really existing capitalism that formed the foundation for apartheid, could be cleansed of its racial features and refashioned into a system capable of accommodating the interests of all classes. The experience of the entire post-apartheid period has demonstrated that this is utopian.

To maximise the prospects of unity WASP proposes that the workers party be based on the following minimum programme:

- Nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy – the banks, the mines, the commercial farms, big factories and big businesses – under workers control and management organised according to a democratic plan of production
- Free quality de-colonised education for all; free healthcare; high quality service delivery
- Quality housing for millions of shack dwellers and, low interest loans and rates control for home owners in working class communities
- R10,000 per month minimum wage for all full-time workers and an end to outsourcing and labour broking
- Elected workers party representatives to receive no more than the wage of a skilled worker, accountable to, and immediately recallable by, democratic party structures

As the ANC's crisis plays itself out in the run-up to the 2019 elections, the class struggle will not be suspended. On the contrary it is set to intensify. As soon as the February national budget, there could be a renewed offensive to solve the crisis of capitalism at the expense of the working class. The labour law amendments restricting the right to strike, to limit their duration etc. are intended to disarm the working class in advance. On all fronts of the class war – education, communities and the workplace – the working class will have to mobilise. The workers party can come into being as a force uniting these struggles into an unstoppable tsunami to sweep aside the ANC government in 2019. We must use the electoral challenge as a platform to organise to the abolition of the capitalist system itself to prepare the way for a socialist South Africa, a socialist Africa and a socialist world.

IF YOU AGREE WITH WHAT YOU READ...

tel: 081 366 7375

SMS: 081 366 7375

WhatsApp: 081 366 7375

web: www.workerssocialistparty.co.za/join-wasp

email: workersandsocialistparty@gmail.com

