

PATRIARCHY



AND THE WORKERS MOVEMENT

Patriarchy – where it is accepted as ‘normal’ for men to dominate and hold authority over women – is a serious problem throughout South African society. It is visible in the sky-high levels of rape and domestic violence, including the murder of women by their partners, sexual harassment in the workplace and on the street, inequality between men and women in pay, career progression, educational achievements and unequal responsibility in the home for domestic chores and care of the young, old and infirm.

Executive Committee statement

A key point for Marxists is that this is not a uniquely ‘South African’ problem. Patriarchy has been central to all class societies throughout history. It remains so across the world today under capitalism. We have recently published a detailed analysis of this in *Marxist-Feminism: How it Arms Us to Struggle Against Women’s Oppression* (on our website).

In WASP we are clear that the struggle against capitalism and the struggle against the oppression of women are two sides of the same coin. Ultimately, all forms of oppression, including sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia etc., trace their origins, and continuation, to the class divisions in society. It is not possible for socialists and class conscious workers to struggle against capitalism without embracing the struggle against the different forms of oppression it creates, including patriarchy and the oppression of women. And then, not just in words, but in deeds too. The new women’s movements that have emerged across the world, including #TheTotalShutdown movement here in South Africa, are welcome developments that show the determination, particularly of young women, to struggle against all forms of gender inequality and discrimination.

But Marxists recognize that as long as capitalism exists the working class cannot help being infected, to one degree or another, by the backward ideas and prejudices that class society encourages. A key question for us is how socialists and class conscious workers respond to this reality. In the first instance it requires paying careful attention to how the workers’ movement itself is organised.

Class society treats women as ‘second class’ people. If trade unions are to fight the bosses, and the capitalist system they defend, they must reject this and stand for the full equality of men and women. Any amount of cowardice or half-heartedness in tackling the issue of gender oppression will hold all working class struggles back. Workers understand the necessity for maximum unity in the workplace. But workers are divided as long as sexist attitudes are tolerated within our movement and sexual harassment treated as ‘normal’ or acceptable

behaviour. This must be challenged by workplace campaigns and education. But it also means that the culture inside trade unions, at every level, including the conduct and attitude of its leaders must send a clear message – we are against sexism and patriarchy **and do not tolerate it in our own house.**

Leadership

The ANC government has set the opposite example. Jacob Zuma was the worst kind of patriarch. In 2005, as deputy-president, he stood trial for the rape of Khwezi, a woman decades younger. The obvious abuse of his personal relationship with her (she was the daughter of a close friend and fellow ANC member), regardless of his acquittal, is the very definition of patriarchy. Zuma’s comment that he protected himself from HIV by “taking a shower” has become infamous as a reflection of his dismissive and unapologetic attitude. But not only did he remain an ANC leader, he was elected ANC president soon after with the support of Cosatu, the ANC Women’s League, and the then Julius Malema-led ANC Youth League.

The ANC Women’s League went so far as to say that Khwezi should “feel lucky to have been raped by such a handsome man”. This underlines that patriarchy is an entrenched social power structure that women themselves can internalise – effectively colluding in gender oppression. That the Women’s League, twelve years later, still has no understanding of the power-dynamics in gender oppression is reflected in their new call for the castration of rapists – as if gender violence is reducible to the ‘uncontrollable’ sexual urges of men.

In 2017, ANC deputy-minister, Mduzuzi Manana, was charged with assaulting a woman at a night club. The ANC leadership was extremely slow to respond and allowed Manana to remain an MP after he eventually resigned his ministerial position. All of this sent the signal that for the ANC the oppression of women was not a serious offence and that sexists and patriarchs would be protected. Indeed, key ANC government policies, such as the Traditional Courts Bill, legislate to maintain patriarchy, in effect removing equal rights from women living in rural areas.

Cosatu & Losi

The significance of Zingiswa Losi’s election as Cosatu’s first woman president has been widely commented on. No doubt this was a considerable personal achievement that required withstanding and defying sexist and patriarchal attitudes over many years. But is it a victory for women **in general** and working class women **in particular**? The answer is “no” because Losi remains on the same political programme as her male predecessors.

Losi is a member of the ANC’s NEC and the SA Communist Party’s Central Committee. The neo-liberal capitalist policies

of the ANC government over the past generation have entrenched unemployment, poverty and inequality in society. This disproportionately affects women, reinforcing gender inequality. Cosatu has betrayed the working class, and working class women in particular, by giving the ANC government a 'revolutionary' alibi throughout this time. Losi clearly intends to continue this stance. She and Cosatu have supported Ramaphosa's austerity budget, fuel price hikes, poverty-level minimum wage and attacks on the right to strike.

It is a massive disservice to the struggle against women's oppression to suggest that having a woman in 'high office' somehow compensates for any of this. It can only distract attention from the enormous responsibility of the ANC government, supported by the leaders of the SACP and Cosatu, in maintaining the conditions for the oppression of women to flourish.

Saftu & Vavi

Many of the workers that have joined the affiliates of the Saftu trade union federation have done so in search of a clean-break from the class collaboration and ineffectiveness of Cosatu and the other federations. There is a burning desire amongst many workers for a genuinely radical and militant trade union alternative. The Saftu strike in April against the ANC government's attack on workers' rights and the poverty-level minimum wage put down an important reference point – when all other federations accepted the attack, Saftu alone was prepared to stand-up. The Saftu hosted Working Class Summit in July created another important reference point by bringing together many working class organisations – pointing in the direction of broader working class unity.

Zwelinzima Vavi, general secretary of Saftu, has been closely identified with these achievements. He is a popular figure not just with Saftu members but with the working class in general. This will have added to the disappointment felt by many when they heard that Vavi has again been involved in a sexual harassment scandal, again of a woman working in the organisation he leads – this time of a woman employed by Numsa and working as a cleaner in Saftu's head office.

Some will be stunned and just want to bury their heads in the sand until it 'blows over'. Others, especially in the leadership of Saftu and its affiliates, will be tempted to down-play the incident and 'close ranks'. This latter attitude is indicated in Saftu's reply to media stories. They confirm that the report is true but put it down to "a misunderstanding". Rather than showing humility and remorse that such an incident could happen at Saftu's own HQ, involving its most senior leader, the statement is defensive and lashes out in anger at "faceless individuals" on a so-called mission to "destabilise both Saftu and Numsa".

There is no doubt that a case of sexual harassment in the top leadership of Saftu, coming so closely after the election of Cosatu's first woman president, is like a gift from heaven for those wanting to discredit attempts to build an alternative outside of the Tripartite Alliance. It is no surprise that the bosses' *Business Day* newspaper ran the story with several quotes from the yellow-union, Limusa, which was formed by a small break-away from Numsa. Limusa's website has not been updated in over a year but they can find the energy for a press release condemning Vavi! No attention should be paid to the likes of these.

But placing centre-stage the obvious fact that Saftu has political enemies, and obsessing about the motives of those who 'leaked' the information about Vavi's misdemeanour, misses the point – ***there should have been no incident, 'misunderstanding' or otherwise, in the first place!*** That this is not the main message being communicated reveals a lack of gender consciousness

on the part of the Saftu leadership. They are overlooking the power relations that exist between the leadership, which is predominantly male, and women who work in trade unions as cleaners, administrators, officials and organisers. Formerly, trade unions were at the forefront of raising the level of gender consciousness in society as a whole. If Saftu is to distinguish itself from class collaborationist unions, it is its duty to take a primary role in ensuring that sexual harassment is uprooted from all workplaces including its own. In this concrete manner, SAFTU can play a leading role in the struggle against women's oppression and all its horrific manifestations. ***WASP condemns Vavi's behaviour and is dissatisfied with the Saftu leadership's response.***

The generally progressive beginning that Saftu has made is not guaranteed to continue without a full and conscious break with the bureaucratic traditions of Cosatu and the other federations. How a scandal involving a senior leader is handled is of vital importance. That the woman involved reportedly considers the matter resolved and wants no further action must be respected if accurate, but it should not be the end of the story for a responsible and gender conscious leadership. The Saftu leadership needs to send a clear message to the working class, and working class women first and foremost, about the culture and tradition that Saftu intends to build.

If leadership is to be genuinely accountable then, as a minimum, Vavi should be issued with a final warning that any future conduct even hinting at continued sexual misconduct will result in immediate dismissal. But further, Vavi himself should offer to resign, with a democratic process agreed upon whereby the rank-and-file of Saftu's affiliates can decide whether or not to accept it.

The broader working class's consciousness on gender issues has been a casualty of the class collaboration of Cosatu and the other federations. By breaking from this Saftu is potentially well positioned to assist in rebuilding it. A new statement that acknowledges head-on that the patriarchy of class society is an issue facing the working class, and that, starting in its own ranks Saftu is determined to combat it, would be an important start. Crucially, proposals for action could be put forward, including on the development of Saftu's and its affiliate's gender education programmes and gender structures. This could include gender control commissions, elected by and accountable to union congresses, co-operating across affiliates and working in a clear and transparent manner, that are empowered to investigate allegations of sexual misconduct against office holders – from shop stewards to general secretaries. They could submit independent reports to Congresses making recommendations on how to deal with them, including urgent referral to the police in cases of violent and threatening behaviour, maintaining independent oversight over the progress of cases and campaigning against any bias or inadequacies in police procedures.

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Visit our website or email us:

**workersandsocialistparty
@gmail.com**