August 2012 was the bloodiest month for trade unions in South Africa since the end of apartheid. The infamous Marikana massacre on the 16th of August and various other days of unrest before and after the event resulted in the deaths of 44 people. The backdrop to this situation was the violent competition between the African National Congress-allied National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and its rival, the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). NUM, although closely linked to the ANC government, lost its organising privileges at Lonmin Platinum Mine in favour of AMCU due to perceptions among workers that the former operated too close to management and the fact that its representation figures dropped from 66% to 49%.

In reality the bloody conflict between NUM and AMCU indicated a developing ideological and practical rift in the whole of the up till now monolithic trade union sector controlled by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). This article will succinctly explain some of the conflicts in the trade union sector, the implications these conflicts have for the ANC and, lastly, the implications this might have for future practical politics in South Africa. As alluded to above, one of the most prominent conflicts in the sector is between AMCU and NUM.

Fears existed that a strike in the platinum sector could spill over and effect gold production as well.

AMCU versus NUM

AMCU is a COSATU and NUM breakaway union which is especially active in the Platinum Belt. The competition for bargaining rights between AMCU and NUM was especially fierce in 2012 at Lonmin Platinum and this directly and indirectly lead to the Marikana massacre and civil unrest in the Rustenburg area. Currently AMCU represents about 70% of Lonmin Platinum’s work force compared to NUM’s 20%. In 2013 NUM accepted the wage increase offer of management in the platinum sector of 8% while AMCU demanded a R12 500 minimum wage. In anticipation of the disruption caused by strikes in the platinum sector, the Rand reached a fresh five-year low in January 2014 and analysts predicted that the Rand was likely to decline to R11 to a dollar if a prolonged strike materialised. Fears existed that a strike in the platinum sector could spill over and effect gold production as well. AMCU is, however, not without its own internal controversy. Its president Joseph Mathunjwa has been accused of being unrealistic and out
of touch with the rank and file of its own organisation. The (violent) split between AMCU and NUM/COSATU is indicative of wider splits opening up within trade unions.

COSATU versus the ANC

COSATU was launched in 1985 after four years of talks between unions opposed to apartheid. At its launch COSATU represented 33 unions and had more than two million members. The founding principle of COSATU rests on a rejection of apartheid and racism in all its forms. “We believe that all workers, regardless of race, should organise and unite. Now more than ever before we need to bury the apartheid legacy”, furthermore “COSATU believes in the radical transformation of society and ultimately the building of a socialist society as an alternative to the exploitative and unfair capitalist system that now reigns in our country” and so, according to COSATU, “naturally, COSATU is part of the tripartite alliance with the SACP and ANC”.1

This alliance has of late not been an easy one. Especially Zwelinzima Vavi, former General Secretary of COSATU has not hesitated to criticise the ANC for apparent corrupt practises, the e-Toll system and president Zuma in particular for lack of leadership and for ignoring corruption in his own party.

He accused government (among other things) of managing or steering South Africa “in the direction of a full-blown predator state in which a powerful, corrupt and demagogic elite of political hyenas increasingly controls the state as a vehicle of accumulation”. This soon led to personal and professional problems for him. After allegations of corruption, extramarital affair and misappropriation of funds Vavi was suspended from COSATU in August 2013. This treatment of Vavi left COSATU internally divided with supporters for the ANC (and Zuma) on the one side and vocal critics on the other. (After the intervention of the courts Vavi was reinstated in his post in April 2014 declaring there can be no reconciliation with people engaged in corruption.)

COSATU’s internal divisions

The attack on Vavi and the debate surrounding his removal as Secretary General of COSATU, which, it must be remembered, is a member of the governing tripartite alliance of the country, opened deep-rooted fissures in the heart of the broad liberationist movement in South Africa. These fissures are seated in the interpretation of the Freedom Charter2. On 12 August 2013 NUMSA’s3 special Central Committee Meeting tabled the following critique on COSATU:

Inevitably, the rupture in COSATU is between those who want to see a through going implementation of the Freedom Charter, thus a rejection of the GEAR4 that the NDP5 is, and those who are consciously or unconsciously defending South African capitalism and imperialism by defending the NDP and not openly supporting the implementation of the Freedom Charter, especially its nationalisation demands. Those who want Comrade Zwelinzima Vavi out of COSATU want a COSATU which will be a “toy telephone”, a “labour desk,” a pro capitalist COSATU and those who are defending Comrade Vavi want a revolutionary socialist, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist COSATU. From where we stand, our analytical work confirms that the centre of the crisis in COSATU resides in the capitalist trajectory of our post 1994 socio-economic formation. Comrade Zwelinzima Vavi is seen as a threat to the ambitions of the right wing capitalist forces, which see a COSATU under his leadership as obstructing their capitalist ambitions... (Numsa Special Central Committee Statement: 12 August 2013).

This attack was aimed at COSATU’s fundamental ideological trajectory residing in the holy grail of the Freedom Charter’s “nationalisation clause6.” In effect, NUMSA in its support of Vavi, accused COSATU of being the ANC’s “capitalist” handmaiden, accusing COSATU of rejec-
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ting nationalisation and therefore socialism and ultimately communism. “Imperialism”, “capitalism”, “colonialism”, “neoliberalism” and apartheid translated or articulated as “colonialism of a special type” (of which GEAR and now the NDP is seen as an agent), remain the mortal enemies of all progressive groupings. The ANC (Zuma) and now COSATU is in fact being accused of forsaking the liberationist ideal in favour of “capitalist exploitation.” This critique leads to further conflict.

In December 2013 NUMSA withdrew support for the ANC and SACP and stated that it would not support any party in the upcoming election.

NUMSA versus COSATU

In December 2013 NUMSA withdrew support for the ANC and SACP and stated that it would not support any party in the upcoming election. It would also withhold monetary support to the amounts of R800 000 for the ANC and more than R1 000 000 a month for COSATU. Irvin Jim, NUMSA’s Secretary General further urged COSATU to leave the ANC alliance, a step almost as un-thinkable as the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall or the end of apartheid. NUMSA also issued a call for the resignation of President Zuma. In November 2014 NUMSA was expelled from COSATU, along with seven other affiliates. This led Vavi to Remark that COSATU is in “tatters”.

The implication of this for the ANC (and the Tripartite Alliance)

It seems that NUMSA has become a settling point for groups and individuals at odds with the African National Congress (ANC) and its allies. The Union has decided to forge ahead with its decision to form a “United Front” as a precursor to a possible workers’ or socialist political party to contest future elections. According to Irvin Jim, the Secretary General of NUMSA, the main task of such a party will be to fight for the implementation of the Freedom Charter and to be an organisational weapon against the National Development Plan. As such, this possible political association represents the most potent division and subsequent rival the ANC has yet faced.

The implications of the state of South African trade unions for the 2014 elections.

COPE (Congress of the People) proved to have little impact on the ANC. AGANG SA was even less of a threat and all but imploded. The DA seems to need alliance partners constantly and so destroys legitimate small black political groupings. Malema’s EFF will garner much of the protest votes (against the Zuma government) among the black middle class, “the black diamonds” (black nouveau riche) and the youth. The biggest challenge for the ANC and the governing alliance will however be when this alliance and the ANC as party rips apart on one of their major fault lines.

The organisation of the “United Front” might be in its infancy and it might be too late to render effective electoral opposition in 2014.

The feuds within the South African trade union movement, described above, represent one of these major fault lines. Fundamentally this line hovers between a more liberal and a more socialist and/or nationalist interpretation of the Freedom Charter and so a more liberal versus a more radical restructuring of the future socio-economic system in South Africa. (A more radical restructuring includes nationalisation of industry, banks and land while a less liberal restructuring is pro-
posed by the NDP.) This fault line de
generates against the backdrop of service
delivery failures, corruption and a growing
difference in income between the urban poor and the urban rich.

While it is too early to predict in any way the “demise” of the ANC, this is the most
potent threat yet faced by the ANC and thus by implication, by the tripartite alli-
ance. The organisation of the “United Front” might be in its infancy and it might
be too late to render effective electoral opposition in 2014. But NUMSA is with-
holding monetary support, the support of its members and it is starting to form a
rudimentary opposition on at least two fronts, one as a political party and one in
the organised labour sector.

As the situation stands at the moment it seems that
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As the situation stands at the moment it seems that the burgeoning political spec-
trum that is starting to manifest itself gravitates rapidly towards the left, positioning the ANC and even the SACP with its support of the NDP more towards the centre. This situation creates the formation of radical parties such as the EFF and the proposed United Front on the radical or far left, thus constantly exerting
pressure on the ANC alliance to move to the left, leaving the DA, AGANG, the IFP
and COPE with the image of either being right-wing, “middle-of-the-road” or mere reactionery parties. The future United Front will bleed votes from the ANC and this party must now decide if it will contest this leftwing agenda or if its it is indeed a modern moderate- and thus more liberal party. These choices have huge implications for the future of South Africa.

Endnotes

1. (A brief history of COSATU: http://www.cosatu.org.za.)

2. It is also in these fissures that Julius Malema founded his Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

3. National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa.

4. According to Alec Erwin (2001) “The need to create employment and a better life for our people is the central objective of the economic policy of this government. The Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) remains the basic policy framework to achieve this objec-
tive. The Growth, Employment and Redistri-
bution (GEAR) program is the associated mac-
roeconomic strategy used.


Wealth! The national wealth of our country, the
heritage of South Africans, shall be restored to
the people; The mineral wealth beneath the
soil, the Banks and monopoly industry shall be
transferred to the ownership of the people as a
whole; All other industry and trade shall be
controlled to assist the wellbeing of the people;
All people shall have equal rights to trade
where they choose, to manufacture and to
enter all trades, crafts and professions” (The
Freedom Charter).

7. “The time for looking for an alternative has
arrived” (Irvin Jim, NUMSA Secretary
General).

8. Political party formed by Mamphela Ramphele.