

Sloganeering and coat-tails – A response to some South African activists

John Appolis, Ahmed Jooma and Shaheen Khan have kindly passed on texts they have produced dealing with the current political situation in South Africa, as well as a contribution to discussion by Oupa Lehulere.

I must apologise for the delay in responding to these texts. It is not easy to orientate oneself from a great distance away.

I have to confess I am still at a loss to understand why the various authors continue to place their hopes for the future in an alliance with this or that faction of the “official” liberation movement, the ANC, when the country has seen major irruptions of the working class into public affairs. The events around the miners’ struggle and Marikana unleashed a huge wave of industrial action. All this was reflected in the December 2013 Special Conference decisions of Numsa and the progress made since then in consolidating a combative new trade union federation.

The fact is I find the arguments presented in these texts unconvincing and misleading.

Ahmed and Shaheen compare the current situation in South Africa with that in Germany in 1932, on the eve of the Nazi seizure of power. On this basis, they recommend that workers and young people in South Africa should fall in line behind the Democratic Alliance, the South African Communist Party, the various anti-Zuma factions of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) of Malema in the “Zuma Must Go!” bandwagon. To ward off the danger of being overwhelmed by all of that, they append a wordy “socialist” programme and cross their fingers behind their back.

Revolutionary tactics cannot be deduced from a cook-book. Empiricists identify any phenomenon abstractly (that is, they reduce it to a name, a suitable label, leaving out all its complexity, internal and external

contradictions, motion, indeed its very life) and place this definition confidently in the appropriate pigeonhole. When another phenomenon arises with superficial similarities to the first, they say: "Ahah!", sort through their files, triumphantly fish out the label and the attached recipe and tie it to the new situation.

They forget the warning traditionally drummed into medical students: "Therapy is easy; diagnosis is difficult". Patients who present with apparently similar symptoms may be suffering from very different diseases, and require quite different treatment

Without writing a full-on history of Germany between the World Wars, it is useful to recall some essential details about the situation in which revolutionary Marxists called for a United Front of working-class parties to stop Hitler from coming to power.

For all her problems, Germany under the Weimar Republic was a highly-developed modern, industrial, imperialist state. There was a very numerous and politically-conscious working class which had built not only its own mass, nominally Marxist, Social-Democratic Party (SPD) but also a the most significant revolutionary Communist Party (KPD) outside of the Soviet Union.

This working class had made enormous experiences of struggle in the course of World War I and the following 14 years. At one point a short lived-socialist republic had been proclaimed. Workers had organised strike waves, military and naval insurrections, a general strike to defeat a right-wing coup attempt, workers' and soldiers' councils in many cities and actual Red Armies in some industrial regions. In 1923, the year of the great inflation, there had been serious moves to prepare, equip and carry out a workers' revolution.

The large German Communist Party was inspired and materially supported by the successful revolution in Russia and the workers' state established there.

The Nazi regime was a reckless, foolhardy (and of course profoundly criminal and barbaric) option forced upon the German bourgeoisie by the rival imperialist powers who prevailed in World War I. It was underpinned

by a (fairly) worked-out ideology of blood, soil, violence and conquest. This involved extreme nationalism, racism (towards all allegedly “non-Aryan” races and most immediately affecting the millions of Jews living in Europe), a leadership cult based on utter subjection of the mass, hero-worship, militarism and a simplistic concept of the survival of the fittest. Another aspect of this ideology was utter hatred of all kinds of Marxism and a determination to stamp out Communism in the USSR and everywhere.

We do criticise the policies and actions of the Soviet-led Communist International (CI), and consequently of the German KPD, during the period of “bonapartist” rule by Heinrich Brüning, Franz von Papen and Kurt von Schleicher between 1929 and 1933. First of all, these alleged Marxists did not see the real depth of the coming catastrophe. They had a mechanical view of the effects of the economic meltdown of 1929.

The CI of the day saw the Social Democrats (the reformist socialist party) and the Nazi Party as “not antipodes but twins”. After all, a Social-Democratic government inflicted welfare cuts and austerity measures on the working class and sent armed police to shoot workers demonstrating on May Day. A Social-Democratic minister had said in 1919 “someone has to play the bloodhound” and unleashed vicious right-wing paramilitaries on revolutionary workers. Could the Nazis be any worse?

But of course, they were!

The second mistake the CI made, as a consequence, was that they did not anticipate what damage Hitler would inflict on the workers’ and socialist movement, which was comprehensively crushed with the use of extreme violence and intimidation once Hitler was elected German Chancellor. The CI and KPD leaders thought that Hitler’s accession to power would generate enough mass resistance among workers to lead to a Communist counter-stroke: “After Hitler, us!” they said.

The third mistake the CI and the KPD made was to believe that they could win over Social Democratic workers by propaganda alone, just by brow-beating them with arguments. They offered a “United Front from below” to SPD supporters against their own leaders. In effect, they were saying:

“if you agree with us, join our United Front on our terms” instead of “let’s see how we can get your leaders to work with ours to stop Hitler”. This attitude let the leaders of the SPD and the trade unions “off the hook”, because it was clearly not a serious attempt to overcome the division in the working class. If they had been sincere about a united front, the KPD leaders would have negotiated jointly-acceptable terms on which to organise one with the Social-Democratic party and trade union leaders. In the face of the Nazi threat, such a workers’ united front could have made sense.

It is worth quoting what Trotsky wrote in 1932 in Germany, *What Next?*, not in order to appeal to some Holy Writ, but to get to grips with how the dynamics of class relations are approached:

“Without hiding or mitigating our opinion of the Social Democratic leaders in the slightest, we may and we must say to the Social Democratic workers, ‘Since, on the one hand, you are willing to fight together with us; and since, on the other, you are still unwilling to break with your leaders, here is what we suggest: force your leaders to join us in a common struggle for such and such practical aims, in such and such a manner; as for us, we Communists are ready.’ Can anything be more plain, more palpable, more convincing?”

In precisely this sense I wrote – with the conscious intention of arousing the sincere horror of blockheads and the fake indignation of charlatans – that in the war against fascism we were ready to conclude practical military alliances with the devil and his grandmother, even with Noske and Zörgiebel.”

But there was another side to the question of the United Front, a tactic which the Communist International under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky had adopted: applied incorrectly, it could also become a cover for passivity and inaction. Further on in the same text, Trotsky wrote:

“In the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the policy of the united front became a hue and cry after allies at the cost of sacrificing the independence of the party. Backed by Moscow and deeming themselves omnipotent, the functionaries of the Comintern seriously esteemed

themselves to be capable of laying down the law to the classes and of prescribing their itinerary; of checking the agrarian and strike movements in China; of buying an alliance with Chiang Kai-Shek at the cost of sacrificing the independent policies of the Comintern; of re-educating the trade union bureaucracy, the chief bulwark of British imperialism through educational courses at banquet tables in London, or in Caucasian resorts; of transforming Croatian bourgeois of Radich's type into Communists, etc., etc. All this was undertaken, of course, with the best of intentions, in order to hasten developments by accomplishing for the masses what the masses weren't mature enough to do for themselves."

The mistake the CI leaders then made after they had digested the depth of the disaster that Hitler's take-over represented, was to believe that there was a way to prevent the spread of fascism by forming an alliance with "democratic", anti-fascist capitalists in which the interests of the working class were clearly and officially subordinated to the leadership of the bourgeoisie. This policy of a so-called "Popular Front" also enters our story, because it is the entire foundation and backbone of the policy of the CI's successors (although the body itself was wound up during World War II) towards the colonial liberation movement in general and the African National Congress in particular. They dressed this tribal and bourgeois formation up as the main revolutionary force in South Africa and systematically over many years did everything they could to subordinate the South African working class to it.

But it was the black working class which drove the struggle against apartheid forward. Nevertheless in 1990-1994, the ANC, supported by the SACP and in close dependence upon imperialist governments, the mining monopolies and the parties of the white minority, carried out its own form of "state capture". Subsequent history (as many can explain) has exposed what this "state capture" actually meant.

Is Zuma Hitler?

No, Zuma is Zuma.

Since the end of apartheid rule, governments of the ANC in alliance with the SACP and Cosatu have all provided a democratic screen, engaging the

support of as many local forces as possible while serving the interests of international capital. Apartheid was ended and majority rule installed by arrangement with the international mining companies, major banks and imperialists governments.

The Triple Alliance was cobbled together from individuals in exile all over the world parachuted into positions of authority in the major institutions, including the trade union movement. "Sections" of the South African bourgeoisie black and white were appeased to various extents to make the Triple Alliance workable, while the commercial headquarters of the big mining companies were prudently moved abroad to major imperialist centres such as London. It is the imperialists' requirements which have predominated ever since under a veneer of national independence and self-government.

But the Triple Alliance was fragile and it is breaking up, above all under the pressure of the masses, first and foremost the working class.

Now candidates for power in South Africa must demonstrate to the satisfaction of their international imperialist masters that they can directly confront and subjugate that pressure. Zuma is up for the job, equipped with the necessary qualities and eager to enjoy the fruits of such work.

Such regimes practice a level of self-enrichment at the expense of their own peoples which is not merely tolerated but actually encouraged by their international patrons. These regimes were conceived in corruption and live by it. They steal state property with impunity, rob the public treasury and have been known to "nationalise" and then take over (or sell to cronies) traditionally-owned tribal land, etc.

They will play every vile trick to protect their access to wealth, including crushing democratic protests, imprisoning and murdering opponents and fanning ethnic differences into open conflict.

To retain local control over their populations they rely on tribal elites bought with a fraction of the loot often alongside the straightforward rule of gangsters.

Such are the shared characteristics of African “independence” regimes. And for that reason, they are instable regimes of crisis. But although they share some features with fascist regimes (for example, suspension of the “rule of law”, crimes against the people, even outright genocide in some cases) they are not as such fascist regimes.

Labelling them “fascist” can be quite misleading. Tony Blair and George W. Bush branded Saddam Hussain a “fascist” in order to justify the second Gulf war. They went to war against the “fascist” Hussain, but it was the Iraqi people they were aiming at and actually hit. You could say the same about their treatment of Libya under Ghaddafi and Syria under Assad, all in different ways.

Confusing Popular Front and United Front

“The Popular Front”, Ahmed Jooma and Shaheen Khan correctly say “is the main strategic weapon of the bourgeoisie to tie the hands of the working class to the interests of the bosses”. However, they soon go on to urge NUMSA and its allies to plunge straight into – a sort of Popular Front!

They spend five sentences enumerating the forces predominating in the “anti-State Capture Movement” which make it very clear that this is a mass popular movement around a “single issue” (i.e “Zuma Must Fall!”). They then write: “The class character of these movements is not as important to ordinary people as the fact that they are ready to take up the fight practically and immediately”.

Yes, it is good for the masses to get involved in political action. But it is the job of revolutionary movements to point out the things which are really important to ordinary people above and beyond what the bourgeoisie presents as important.

Ahmed Jooma and Shaheen Khan think that the presence of a working-class force inside the movement armed with “its own programme and banner” will magically convert the Popular Front into a United Front. It is worth quoting what they say in full:

“20: The task of the proletariat and its leadership is to join the general movement. However, in doing so it enters the fray under its own

programme and banner. It applies the policy of the united front which is 'unity in action'. March separately. Strike together".

However, they have just spent more than a few lines describing the class character of the "general movement" in considerable detail, which makes it clear that this movement is NOT a workers' united front but a cross-class popular front irrespective of whatever programme and banner we Marxists "enter the fray" under.

Comrade Appolis ("Critical Comments on the article: *Platform of the Left Bloc in the Zuma Must Go Campaign* by Comrades Ahmed Jooma and Shaheen Khan") notes the discrepancy here (which is to his credit). He also sees the need to build a core of politically-conscious leading activists with a breadth of vision which extends beyond the parochial. However, he both turns his back on the main force able to bring about such a cadre (which is NUMSA and the new trade union federation) and proposes a different version of the same popular front which Ahmed and Shaheen put forward:

"The working class and its forces should enter this conflict with its own vision, strategy and demands. It should enter it against the big bourgeoisie and its system of accumulation by calling for Zuma to go. And this call is in line with the sentiments and mood of the masses".

Further on he notes: "the working-class movement exhibits numerous weaknesses – organisationally, politically and ideologically. It is marked by fragmentation, low levels of mass implantation and has a very disperse advance guard who are caught up in the immediacy of its issues."

He is impatient of the developments among organised workers:

"The trade unions are only now in the beginning phase of shaking off the effects of years of false politics, bureaucracy and inertia. Legalism and an excessive emphasis on an industrial relations' approach to class struggle seems to still frame its politics and methodologies. Its social base is not as yet at the cutting edge of anchoring a mass movement. NUMSA/SAFTU have so far express some correct sentiments but have a way to go."

It is true that trade unions cannot solve all the political problems of

the working class. The characteristics which John Appolis lists reflect one side of the conditions under which trade unions operate: they deal with the day-to-day problems of their entire membership containing a wide range of men and women with a variety of outlooks; they deal with bread-and-butter issues; they deal with employers; they stand up for their members' rights day by day within with the legal and political framework of class relations and understandably both work within it and work to improve it using established channels.

Trade unions have to have an administrative machine and responsible leaders. If they are doing their job properly they have to spend a lot of effort on organisational matters. This is their strength as class organisations but at the same time it makes them susceptible to the influence of the employers' class.

What was overwhelmingly striking, following Marikana and the resulting wave of mass industrial working-class action, was that the leaders of NUMSA decided to use their union's resources in order to lay the basis for a political development by their class. The quantity of experiences mounting up of 20 years of majority rule under the Triple Alliance turned into a new quality, the determination to work for a new political organisation which would fight for the interests of the working class, the fulfilment of the promises of the liberation struggle.

The trade union movement is not just some undifferentiated mass. There is a mass movement and there are leaders at various levels. Some leaders were not equipped to draw political lessons from the struggles that broke out. Others were loath to escape their intellectual vassalage to the Triple Alliance. It is enormously to the credit of NUMSA's leadership that the union has taken forward its special conference decisions of 2013 into re-building the strongest possible unity in a new union confederation around new positions in the movement.

Unlike them, Comrade Appolis is looking for a short-cut to overcoming the movement's "numerous difficulties". He says:

"What the demand for Zuma to go offers is an opportunity to unite these struggles, give them a national expression and a connection to a common

national cause. The present conjuncture requires this qualitative shift in the struggles of the working class. And the Zuma must go provides the basis to effect such a qualitative shift.

“The unification of these struggles on a national basis will not amount to an artificial manoeuvre. Rather it will organically weave together the thousands of different struggles of the masses into a national stream. This will place the working class in a position to articulate an alternative ideological and political explanation of the political economy of corruption, of the class character of the ANC and its factions, of the nature of the South African social formation and the position of white monopoly capital therein”.

On this basis, he asserts: “This coalescing and cohering of a nation-wide cadre of militants with their thousands of connections with the concrete struggles of the masses is the key task of the moment”.

To achieve this, he proposes:

“The starting point is to convene a National Assembly of Representatives of the Struggling Formations of the Working Class, especially those at the cutting edge of the anti-corruption struggles, for instance Outsourcing Must Fall movement, Abahlali Freedom Park, Housing Assembly, Tembelihle Crisis Committee, SECC, Black Sash, R2K and many others. It is these formations that must anchor the movement against the Zuma Bloc and white monopoly capital. The coalescing of these formations on a national scale with clarified class perspectives on the political economy of corruption and crystalizing around a common set of demands shall enable the working class to make its presence and imprint felt on the national anti-corruption movement. NUMSA and SAFTU are to be engaged to be part of this initiative. At some point overtures should also be made towards COSATU to come on board.”

However, he proposes all this under conditions where the movement is dominated by the demagogy of various self-seeking sectors and above all of the Economic Freedom Fighters of Julius Malema.

“White Monopoly Capital” and demagogy of every kind

Oupa Lehulere is even more pessimistic about the role that organised labour can play than is John Appolis. But this only becomes clear at the end of a long and rather confusing article, *Cronin and Company harness Marxism to the service of White Monopoly Capital (The SACP and the Cronification of Marxism)*, which foregrounds the significance of “white monopoly capital”.

At the heart of Lehulere’s emphasis on “white monopoly capital” is the idea that the future of the mass movement must involve an alliance with one or another “sector” of South Africa’s black bourgeoisie as a stepping-stone into the political arena; that such an alliance is essential and possible against the common enemy, “white monopoly capital”.

To put it briefly: The whole basis for the “Zuma Must Fall” agitation is that in robbing the state finances alongside his Gupta associates, Zuma is seeking to (or obliged to) “capture” the South African state, turning it from a democracy of some sort into his own personal fiefdom.

The existence of black capitalists in South Africa is noted and they are classified into two main sectors. The “credit” bourgeoisie are said to be those who were bought off by the big international corporations with credits which enabled them to become shareholders and then branch out into businesses of their own. (One thinks of the former miners’ union leader Cyril Ramaphosa).

The “tenderpreneurs” on the other hand, are those who exploit any kind of relationship with the ruling alliance in order to win contracts to carry out public or government works. Jacob Zuma and his Gupta associates are meant to be placed in this category.

It is made into an article of faith that these are two separate groups who constitute the South African black bourgeoisie. Essentially, all those who call for the South African workers’ movement to advance by joining the “Zuma Must Fall” campaign are arguing for the workers and the masses to support the “credit” sector of capitalists.

Zuma carried out a cabinet reshuffle in March this year, removing Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan and replacing him with the supposedly more

malleable Malusi Gigaba. Gigaba appointed as an advisor a well-regarded left-leaning associate professor at Wits University, Chris Malikane.

Malusi Gigaba may have had good reason to believe that Malikane was a Zuma loyalist, but he apparently had not gone into detail about how he (Malikane) rationalised that position. That became clearer when people got around to reading what Malikane actually wrote. Take *How to break monopoly white capital* for example (<http://www.iol.co.za/news/opinion/how-to-break-monopoly-white-capital-8779291>).

Malikane starts dramatically by saying: “The class structure under colonialism or apartheid remains intact. The African is at the bottom of the food chain. The darkest skin performs the toughest job at the lowest wage.”

He goes on: “Even within the capitalist class, the darkest skin is the lowest in the hierarchy. It should also be mentioned that, within the African capitalist class, the upper stratum which is credit-based is found inside, and accumulates directly through, established white monopoly capitalist structures.”

And: “White monopoly ownership and control of state power is even more secured if the government in place is democratic, since the masses believe ‘this is our government, we voted for it’. Yet, what cannot be explained is why ‘our government’ is failing to resolve our centuries-old problem of white monopoly of social power.

“The battle over the removal of the finance minister is the battle waged by white monopoly capital in alliance with the credit-based black capitalist, against the rise of the tender-based black capitalist class, which also has links with the leadership of political parties.”

He explains further: “South Africa has now entered a phase of intense rivalry between capitalist groupings. In this phase, it is not possible to advocate political abstention, especially of masses of the oppressed and super-exploited African working class.

“The fight against white monopoly capital and its black/African allies,

is an integral part of the struggle to consummate the national democratic revolution.”

(The reference to “consummating the national democratic revolution’ rings rather hollow in the mouth of a man who asserts that “white monopoly ownership and control of state power is even more secure if the government in place is democratic”, etc.)

“The tender-based black capitalist class”, he continues, “is not likely to win without the support of the mass of the black and African working class. Unlike its white counterpart, the tender-based black capitalist class has no coherent historical international backing. Its relationship with the organised working class, which is the only force that is capable of disrupting white monopoly capitalist power at production, is very weak if non-existent.

“Nevertheless, from the standpoint of the objective analysis of the class forces, in so far as the tender-based capitalist class has begun the war against the dominant white monopoly capitalist class, it has to be encouraged.” (my emphasis – B.A.)

And in order to “encourage” that “tender-based black capitalist class”, Malikane took a government job under Zuma!

Apart from that one little detail, his proposals are the mirror image of those of Ahmed, Shaheen, Appolis and Lehulere. They all say that the South African working class is in no state to lead the struggle; its only hope to get into the game is on the coat-tails of this or that “sector” of the bourgeoisie; either sector. Toss a coin ...

Lehulere is so enamoured of the phrase “white monopoly capital” that he uses it nearly sixty times in his article. It is a conception he profoundly shares with Malikane (and many on the radical left in South Africa). It is a phrase which seems to evoke the condition of the black masses, and it does capture one side of the imperialist oppression of the people of South Africa. However, it leaves out so much about imperialism that is easily abused by demagogues.

If it is thought mainly to be the whiteness of the foreign monopolies

(which are indeed in the main run by rich white men) which enables them to exploit and oppress the people of South Africa, then the suggestion is left open that black capitalism is a less daunting prospect.

What is startling is that Malikane's proposals are also barely different from the proposals of Julius Malema and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), proposals which "radical lefts" such as Rehad Desai now laud to the skies in the TV documentary *Julius vs the ANC!* "White monopoly capital" continues to rule South Africa, is the cry. Resources and industries must be taken away from the control of "white monopoly capital" and nationalised.

The fact that Chris Malikane's attitude is simply as it were a photographic negative or reversed mirror image of the attitude of the EFF etc. places Lehulere in a certain difficulty. While he understandably defends Chris Malikane against the cynical sophistry of the South African Communist Party's Cronin, his own adherence to the theory of "white monopoly capitalism" is uncomfortable. Mouthing the catch-phrase "white monopoly capital", one could support Zuma against his opponents, or just as easily support Malema, the SACP, the Democratic Alliance et al against Zuma. It is a formula tailor-made for demagogues.

To put some distance between himself and Malikane, Lehulere drags in a disagreement over the question of the state.

It would of course have been quite enough to say that Malikane's decision to accept a job as an advisor to a minister hand-picked as a crony by Zuma was either misguided or unprincipled. He (Malikane) may have imagined that the job would enable him to advance the nationalisation of the country's resources and their mobilisation to fulfil the needs of the population.

But if Lehulere had merely expressed that simple truth, it would have left open to view how threadbare is the illusion that any "sector" of the South African bourgeoisie is interested in furthering the interests of the working class in any way.

So Lehulere raised his understandable disagreement with Malikane's career choice to the level of a principled disagreement over the nature of the

state. Lenin is dragged into the discussion, not to mention Gramsci. We are told to concern ourselves not with “inside the state” or “outside the state” but in a different state. It is wrong not merely to sell yourself for a job on the Zuma payroll, but to direct any demands on the state.

Now whatever Lenin thought about the state (and his works are available for all to study), he never thought the working class (and the broader masses) could ignore it. He encouraged workers to place demand upon the state, to raise their political demands at the level of the government, the state and the legal system, to try to place their own representatives in institutions at that level.

The task facing the South African masses has little to do with individual lefts taking government jobs. What is needed is what NUMSA has put forward: a united front throughout the masses alongside a movement for socialism, enriched by a study of the examples of struggles for socialism around the world and leading to the formation of a genuine workers' party.

There are no short cuts to this. The organised working class in the unions in the new federation needs to be a backbone of iron sustaining this movement. The work has to go forward systematically and soberly. It can only succeed if, alongside a growing mass of conscious support, a cadre is steeled in the course of the struggle. The movement must train itself not to be stampeded or derailed by demagogues of any stripe. The stakes are too high.

Bob Archer, 23 June 2017

A reply to Martin Jensen: The

Numsa Moment – Has it lost Momentum?

A reply to Martin Jensen: *The Numsa Moment – Has it lost Momentum?*

By Bob Archer, Jan 2017

Since the end of Apartheid in the early 1990s, South Africa has officially been ruled by a Triple Alliance of the African National Congress (ANC), South African Communist Party (SACP) and Confederation of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu). At its Special National Congress in December 2013, the South African metalworkers' union, Numsa, called for an historic break with the Alliance and adopted a series of initiatives. What they proposed – and how these initiatives have fared – deserves serious and sustained discussion, not just in South Africa and the region, but right around the world. To that extent, Comrade Jensen's article raises important questions which deserve a response.

The decisions of Numsa's Special National Congress (summarised alongside this article in *What Numsa decided*) should be studied carefully by all who wish and hope to see a renewal and re-awakening of the workers' and socialist movement internationally and are seriously considering what methods of political work this involves. Numsa's initiative urgently requires critical thought about the habits and working methods of working-class and socialist activists, in the prosperous nations of the "West" as much as in Africa and elsewhere.

Martin Jensen hails the Numsa turn but is critical about how Numsa has selected its practical proposals and taken them forward. He also criticises those of us who welcomed and forthrightly promulgated these initiatives.

Workers' International responded very positively to the Numsa

Special National Congress and its decisions. No doubt Cde. Jensen includes us among those guilty of “impressionism”:

“While many socialists correctly supported Numsa’s important watershed political decisions and got directly involved in their realisation, they failed at the same time to recognise the historical and current weaknesses of the union and assist in overcoming them. A combination of impressionism and overzealousness saw many socialists jumping in without critically appreciating the challenges of the period and limitations of Numsa and its leadership”, he says.

What should Numsa have done? Cde. Jensen thinks above all that Numsa should have opened the door to collaboration with the dissident former youth wing of the ANC, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). He also criticises Numsa for failing to get involved in the widespread student unrest this year.

(Just a thought: One group of people identifies the Numsa turn as a politically and strategically essential break and decides to encourage that political development in every way possible, undeterred by difficulties and without setting themselves up to lecture the comrades involved about supposed shortcomings identified from outside. A second group compares the numbers whom the EFF can mobilise for a rally or demonstration with the numbers Numsa can turn out and sets aside the – quite important – question of the class nature of the forces involved in order to give priority to the EFF. Which group best deserves to be described as “impressionist”?)

Cde. Jensen has other criticisms of the action programme which Numsa developed in December 2013, describing it as “hardly the issues that could have captured the imagination and concerns of other workers” and taking Numsa to task for failing to co-ordinate a campaign for a living wage with Cosatu and above all for not timing strike action to coincide with AMCU, the break-away from the South African mineworkers’ union.

Cde. Jensen outlines an alternative set of actions saying: "The 6-phase rolling mass action should have been changed to ensure that issues more important to the working class, with a greater preparedness on their part to struggle around, such as for decent housing and service delivery, jobs for the unemployed, free quality education, etc."

So Cde. Jensen proposes that Numsa's carefully-planned campaign to organise and guide workers into becoming the backbone of a defence of their class interests (and of the common interests of the wider masses) should be liquidated into precisely the kind of demagogic generality which EEF practises.

The 1 September 2016 Numsa Press Release (reporting a well-attended meeting of the Steering Committee to form a new Trade Union Federation) soberly explains: "Our country is the headquarters of service delivery protests and sadly the media is no longer reporting these protests. They have been relegated to traffic reports when they disrupt motorists' travel plans! Sadly despite the occurrence and breadth of these protests they remain fragmented and isolated to the shame of all of us on the left. This is a challenge we hope to address through the creation of the new federation".

But instead of prioritising the strategic move to create a new federation, Cde. Jensen would prefer the Numsa leaders simply to tail end the demagogues of EEF. Impatiently he waves aside (and distorts) the careful and systematic re-construction of the unity of the workers' movement which Numsa and its allies have been carrying out, complaining that:

"the Numsa leaders, its allies and former Cosatu General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi ... focused on confining the political battle to the Cosatu CEC, the mainstream media and the courts. It meant that the outset in 2011, the workers of the majority of unions in Cosatu were excluded from the important political battle, isolated and disempowered. As mere spectators they did

not grow politically and lacked the confidence to challenge and replace their corrupt leaders. Numsa's call for a united front and a 'movement for socialism' should therefore have fallen on fertile ground if serious and consistent leadership was offered", Cde. Jensen continues, but: "Alas, this was not to be".

"Our trade unions are still bureaucratic and conservative lifeless shells, not prepared to fight and participate in broader struggles of the working class", Cde. Jensen asserts, throwing in for good measure "bureaucratisation... , union chauvinism and not connecting with other trade unions ... conservative collective bargaining arrangements ... participation in the capitalist economy through its investment company" and "the social distance of the union leadership from its members..."

And yet it is within and through this "bureaucratic and conservative lifeless shell" that working-class political life (and thought) has actually asserted itself!

Does Cde. Jensen have any real idea about how workers reach decisions and organise – essentially, how the working class thinks collectively? The flip side of "union chauvinism" is the democratic rights and participation in decision-making of workers who belong to different trade unions. Their membership of this or that trade union and confederation (wherever and whenever it arises, and whatever it appears to be) is not a trivial matter, nor should anyone "over-enthusiastically" try to override the decision-making process of each independent trade union.

Numsa has been in a constant dialogue with the leaderships of other unions and has demonstrated consistently to the memberships of these unions its principled efforts to find the way out of the failure of the NDR

Actually the movement around Numsa has brought together a

Steering Committee which this summer claimed a meeting of 31 unions. As representatives of their own rank-and-file membership, the Numsa leadership were right to carry out a systematic and thorough struggle for their rights in what was the central organisation of workers in South Africa – Cosatu. The middle class radical undertakes splits and schisms in the movement readily, even light-mindedly on the basis of this or that “impressive” news item, some or other theoretical dogma, or more often personal or clique considerations. This is not the way to build workers’ organisations rooted in principles.

The Numsa leaders are precisely providing “serious and consistent” leadership. Cde. Jensen offers a kind of political ambulance-chasing after whatever events appear to be the most impressive at the time.

In arguing his case, Cde. Jensen touches on many important issues. However, he gets many of these issues wrong and in other instances deals rather superficially with genuine problems which require a little more thought.

Let’s start with the really big one:

“Numsa’s biggest impediment that stood in its way and still stands in its way of realizing revolutionary objectives is its history and culture of reformist politics” with “its roots in the formation of the union in 1987 that brought together various radical and conservative trade union political tendencies and necessitated by unification compromises of the unions’ leadership”, says Cde. Jensen.

From the heights of his revolutionary consciousness (or “sober analysis of the overall relation of forces” as he calls it), Cde. Jensen seems to think that the best help he can give Numsa is: “Stop being reformist and start being revolutionary!” No doubt he hopes this advice will fall “on fertile ground”. The more experienced among us may well be less sanguine. Did not Karl Marx himself say of this approach:

“If that’s Marxism, then I’m not a Marxist!”

All the same, Cde. Jensen stumbles upon a number of important points when trying to explain why Numsa (indeed the whole trade union movement in South Africa) became mired in the politics of Stalinism and the “National Democratic Revolution”. The thing is, does he really grasp the significance of what he describes?

MAWU and other unions were born in bold, independent struggles by black workers against a South African capitalism embedded in white minority rule and the Nationalist police state. In these struggles these workers naturally asserted their class independence of the bourgeois/tribalist ANC and its Stalinist supporters in the South African Communist Party. Where the ANC and the SACP promulgated the Freedom Charter, MAWU developed the Workers’ Charter with explicitly socialist demands. The Workers’ Charter is not a mere empty dogmatic call to revolution, but it is very far from being a reformist programme. (The two documents are conveniently available for study and comparison at <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/1912>)

Cde. Jensen rightly identifies the period of the collapse of Apartheid and the installation of the ANC in power as a key moment for the workers’ movement in South Africa. He points to the damage which was being done to the movement even as the apartheid regime collapsed: “By the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc ‘socialist’ regimes and the political reforms of the Apartheid government the union had become seeped (sic) in various reformist approaches to its work that saw it shift away from the radicalism and militancy of its main predecessor, MAWU...”

And yet for all its “reformist approaches”, Numsa was the union which led determined and vigorous opposition to the GEAR plan.

Does Cde. Jensen understand the full significance of what he raises? He returns to the matter (perhaps not seeing that it is the same issue) towards the end of his article, calling for “an honest and thorough assessment of the state of class struggle and balance of class forces” as a basis for deciding “on correct tactics and courses of action to achieve maximum working class unity”.

“Since the Numsa moment and still now” (but in reality since the early 1990s!) “the mass organisations of the working class remain weak or simply non-existent. The general level of class consciousness has remained low. The ‘Left’ is still weak – small, fragmented with limited implantation within the working class. Our trade unions are still bureaucratic and politically conservative lifeless shells, not prepared to fight and participate in broader struggles of the working class”.

Actually this blanket description of trade unions expresses an ultra-left prejudice endemic among petit-bourgeois socialists. It is a hint that Jansen himself is not immune to the “impressionism” he condemns in others.

With that exception, the points raised are important. But the timescale matters: these general political conditions didn't fall from the heavens in December 2013!

Cde. Jensen soon gets onto this, saying: “This weak state of working class organisation exist in the context of the continued neo-capitalist ascendancy after more than two decades of economic and political attacks against the working class that has created new structural divisions within it”.

In reality, the core of this “continued neo-capitalist ascendancy” has been the assault on the working class, in its most concentrated form on the political leadership of that class.

The collapse of the workers' states in the USSR and Eastern Europe has gone hand in hand with a sustained and co-ordinated

attack on Marxism at every level and from every quarter. This has seen more than a few former Marxists turn their coats and become abject evangelists for capitalism.

Behind the “structural divisions” which Cde. Jensen rather blandly evokes lurks the reality that working-class populations with their organisations and working-class leaderships have been broken up, dispersed and thoroughly trampled upon. Where they could, the bourgeoisie has destroyed these bodies and the social structures which underlie them; where they cannot, they have poisoned the minds of their leaders with the idea that capital is all-powerful and above challenge.

This has left scars on the workers’ movement which will not heal overnight or on the basis of chasing after the numbers of the student movement or the EFF. Numsa’s leaders have been all-too conscious of the effects of neo-liberal policies: – de-industrialisation, the fragmentation in the workforce, the dilution of workers’ organising scope and rights and all the rest of it. The practical proposals adopted at the December 2013 Special National Congress were carefully designed to roll them back. But Cde. Jensen thinks they are “hardly the issues that could have captured the imagination and concerns of other workers”.

What Cde. Jensen says about the “creaming off of several layers of leaders of the mass movement from the early 1990s by the ruling class who offered them lucrative jobs in the state and companies owned by white monopoly capital” is well-put. It must be added that many of the revolutionary workers who had come to the fore in MAWU were at that time deliberately sidelined in the movement and some of them openly threatened with violence and their lives put in danger by ANC thugs.

These questions are central to the whole matter of what has happened to the workers’ movement and therefore how and by what steps it can recover. Cde. Jensen is impatient to unite

the EFF and Numsa in a movement which will somehow empower the masses to achieve “decent housing and service delivery, jobs for the unemployed, free quality education, etc.” It’s all so simple! It is also more than a little light-minded. The key question is not adding together numbers to the most possible demonstrators can be called out onto the streets, but how a movement and a leadership can be built in the course of struggle.

There is starting to be a recovery of working-class struggle and socialist consciousness, but it is emerging very tentatively out of the very conditions of the previous defeats and setbacks the movement has suffered. The real danger exists that petit-bourgeois “revolutionary” Marxists sects see these still fragile beginnings – such as the Numsa turn, Bernie Sanders run in the US Democratic Party primaries, the movement which put Jeremy Corbyn into the leadership of the UK Labour Party, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece – and think they are simply an audience for their dogmas, a sphere in which they can build their own groups. At the same time they are impatient, demanding that the movement should produce better results and move faster than it actually can. They are not able to see the working class going through a stage in its own political development.

The dogmatist insists that every development in class-consciousness has to reflect and follow some abstract ideological purity.

The trade unions in South Africa came under sustained pressure to be “bureaucratic and politically conservative lifeless shells”, but it is within the trade unions that workers have collided head-on with the reality that within the Triple Alliance and the government of South Africa the ANC leadership promulgates the policies of the capitalist ruling class and attacks the rights and the very existence of workers, and that the leading lights in the SACP provide a threadbare theoretical justification for what the ANC leadership is

doing.

Cde. Jensen emphasises one side of the matter: workers are held back because of the damage suffered by revolutionary socialist consciousness. But the struggle to overcome that damage is (despite the “impressions” that individual academic Marxists may form) actually taking place through Numsa and Irvin Jim’s insistence that the promises of the National Democratic Revolution should actually be delivered, their obstinate comparing of the results of ANC-Triple Alliance rule with what was promised.

The promises made by the ANC and SACP in the early 1990s were a deception. The tribal elites in the ANC leadership had reached a fundamental agreement with imperialism and the big mining interests that these interests would remain intact. It took a quarter of a century, but over time it became clear to more and more workers and their leaders that they were being conned. The benefits expected and promised from the National Democratic Revolution were not being delivered because there was no move to carry out an NDR. Instead the government has been inflicting neo-liberal attacks on workers and the masses and protecting the interests of big monopolies.

The development in political consciousness reflecting this could not happen in the way a university-trained rationalist might expect, where individuals contemplating the world cogitate about the matter and conclude that the Marxists were right and the National Democratic Revolution is wrong.

The whole dynamic underlying the Numsa turn became very apparent in Numsa General Secretary Cde. Irvin Jim’s Ruth First memorial lecture delivered at Wits University, Braamfontein, on 14 August 2014 (see: <http://www.numsa.org.za/article/uth-first-memorial-lecture-delivered-numsa-general-secretary-cde-irvin-jim-thursday-14-august-2014-great-hall-wits-university-braamfontein/>).

This is a detailed indictment of the experience of a quarter of a century of Triple Alliance rule. Cde. Jim starts by paying homage to Ruth's First's dedication to the struggle as a Marxist who "perfectly understood the necessity to fight simultaneously racial, patriarchal, national and class oppression, domination and exploitation."

He salutes her as one of those SACP members who helped to frame the ANC Freedom Charter, and goes on to contrast the slogans of the Freedom Charter with the reality of Triple Alliance rule

"The Freedom Charter says:

- The People Shall Rule: I argue that the people are not governing ...

- All National Groups Shall have Equal rights

How far have we gone in this regard? Substantively, South African society is structurally incapable of delivering equal rights to all national groups. The system of colonialism, which continues to this day, was based on defining national groups on the basis of race. And so, it came to pass, that Africans remained at the bottom of the food chain ...

- The People Shall Share in the Country's Wealth!

Nalena abayifuni! There is complete refusal to share the country's wealth! Some said it will happen over their dead bodies ...

- The Land Shall be Shared Among Those Who Work It!

Estimates are that black people own between 13–16% of agricultural land in South > Africa. Only 10% of the 30% land earmarked for land restitution has been transferred to black farmers, the target date for the 30% is 2014. At this pace, it will take 100 years to transfer 50% percent of the land back to the people ...

- There Shall be Work and Security!

In the past 20 years, there has been no work! In 1995 the unemployment rate was 31%, in 2013 it had risen to 34% ...

- The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened!

... It is estimated only 3% of the children who enter the schooling system eventually complete with higher grade mathematics. 24% of learners finish schooling in record time. The pass rate in African schools is 43%, while the pass rate in white schools is 97%.

- There Shall be Houses, Security and Comfort!

There is no security and comfort in the houses of the working class!"

And so on for all the other demands of the Freedom Charter, what was promised is compared unfavourably with what has been achieved.

Trotskyists (including Workers International) warned beforehand that this would be the outcome.

Is it enough now to stand on the touch-line bragging that we were right and the working class allowed itself to be dominated by an illusion? Surely not.

It is in interrogating the experience of 25 years of Triple Alliance rule that the workers' movement of South Africa starts to find a way back to its revolutionary roots. It is in the persons of the Numsa leadership and their supporters that this interrogation is taking place. Vague references to "revolution" on Cde. Jensen's part, far from assisting their development, serve to repel the more thoughtful, organised trade union activists away from Marxism rather than attracting them to it. Practical advice (bad advice) to tail-end the demagogues of EEF will not enhance the reputation of the Marxists who give it, but will bring the science of Marxism into disrepute. As Numsa says –

Following Marx – it is only the organised class-conscious working class that can lead in making the socialist revolution.

Workers' International has enthusiastically supported the Numsa turn because it will enable South African workers to test to the limit the theory that the Freedom Charter can bring them satisfaction. And this new movement is standing clearly and consciously against the bourgeois "class enemy" politicians of the ANC.

There is a clear parallel with the British trade unionists (mainly in the United Left group in Unite) who have made up their minds to test to the limit the theory that the working class can find a way to socialism through the election of a left-wing Labour government. Theoretical purists, their eyes fixed on the appearance of the movement, form the "impression" that these workers are "reformists". And so they are, except that nothing stands still. The determination of these activists to put their convictions into practice in the interests of their class and against the class-collaborators in the trade unions and the Labour Party is the condition for a rebirth of socialist consciousness.

The responsibility of Marxists is thoroughly to support and promulgate and practically advance such developments (usually against sectarians and dogmatists who try to impose their quack remedies and verbal radicalism on the movement).

The conditions exist for unity in action between those of us who are convinced that the future of working people lies in the ending of capitalism and those many people who hope a more limited aim can still bring results, and who certainly are dominated at best by social-democratic and Keynesian conceptions. The basis for unity in action is that these movements are gearing themselves up to fight on the class issues involved. Within that unity in action lies the potential for a development in consciousness.

The Numsa initiative has brought together a Steering Committee to form a new Trade Union Federation. 31 trade unions attended the meeting of this Steering Committee on 30 August this year, which the following day issued a highly interesting Press Release.

(<http://www.numsa.org.za/article/numsa-welcomes-fawu-decision-leave-cosatu/>).

The first thing to say about this press release, which really does deserve attentive study, is that it starts from a thorough consideration of “The Current Political Situation and What it Means for the Working Class: Global Balance of Forces”. This glance around the horizon says in the first sentence: “... conservative forces are attempting to consolidate their power all over the globe and here in South Africa.”

Unlike Cde. Jensen, the leading group in this initiative starts by grappling with the international development of the class struggle.

Turning to South Africa, the Press Release makes the comment reported above about service delivery protest, but goes on to say:

“We remain firmly opposed to corruption by the elite political class. We are however acutely aware that the theft of our wealth, is not just by a few rogue families, but the entire capitalist class”.

It continues: “Despite shifting huge amounts of capital off shore, big business is still sitting on R1.5 trillion in our banks as part of an investment strike, which they conveniently blame on political and economic uncertainties, but is actually to force more neo-liberal concessions from government”.

“Agency” and the EFF

Cde. Jensen points out how “the thousands of EFF members are mere spectators to their leaders’ parliamentary shenanigans and occasional letting off steam mass marches”. It is true

that the young supporters of EFF are denied any real role and power in the direction of their movement (in which Marxist rhetoric is mixed up with Black consciousness). For some reason, Cde. Jensen thinks the Numsa leadership could simply rush into a "principled" united front with this EFF.

But Numsa and its allies are actually engaged in a break with the petty-bourgeois politics of the ANC and the Triple Alliance. They are involved in the profoundly important historical job of probing the actual experience of the programme of National Democratic Revolution under ANC rule.

Cde. Jensen believes that the insistence of the Numsa leadership on carrying through systematically the break in the Triple Alliance and Cosatu and the organisation of the biggest possible new trade union federation is a purely conservative reflex which "meant that from the outset in 2011, the workers of the majority of unions in Cosatu were excluded from the important political battle, isolated and disempowered. As mere spectators they did not grow politically ... Only during the last phase when it became clear that Numsa would be expelled and Vavi dismissed, did the leaders convene shop stewards council meetings to engage the rank and file about some (!!) of the issues and even then the unions on the other side were excluded".

Cde. Jensen reveals here a stunning inability to understand vital aspects of actual working-class organisation and consciousness.

First of all, he wants working-class leadership to have as the ready-made starting point of its struggles the worked-out "revolutionary" understanding of all and everything that he, Cde. Jensen, has in his head, when he knows (in his calmer moments) that the whole movement itself has undergone a degeneration from which it must struggle to recover.

He knows that the politics of Stalinism which predominates in

the Triple Alliance is wrong, but he cannot see the essential point about the Numsa turn: that it is a break in the carefully-constructed domination of the workers' movement by Stalinist and reformist conceptions under the pressure of actual events in the class struggle. At one extreme this break is expressed in the killing fields around the Kopje at Marikana, at the other (and this is equally important) at the very top of the trade union movement and in the break-up of the Triple Alliance.

On the one hand Cde. Jensen concedes: "the tasks of Numsa and its allies were enormous"; on the other he criticises "Numsa and its allies" for the slow progress, systematic procedures and careful attention to their own ranks, the body of the rank-and-file Numsa leaders and their development, etc. In the middle of a big political and theoretical struggle, Cde. Jensen urges the Numsa leadership to rush off into an alliance with the EFF who embody the same petty-bourgeois politics with which they are at odds in the ANC and the Alliance.

The 1 September Press Release has a different approach. It expresses extreme concern about "the growing numbers of citizens disengaged with electoral politics. More than 21 million adults of voting age did not even participate in the elections ... there is a crisis of political representation, and our people are less clear about who exactly can best represent their interests".

It confronts frankly the difficulties the trade union movement faces: "In a staggering indictment of Union powerlessness, the employers now set 54% of all wages without any negotiation with workers, either through their union or bilaterally directly with workers" ... "The share of wages in the national income (GDP) has continued to plummet well below 50% from 57% in 1991" ... "More jobs have been shed. In the last three months of 2015 alone 21,000 manufacturing jobs were lost, with another 80,000 gone in the first three months of this year." ... and: "According to statsSA a staggering 54% of our population

lives in poverty”.

From this, Numsa turns toward laying the foundations of a new workers’ movement which “will pay more than lip-service to crucial principles and that will instead offer a vibrant, inclusive and tolerant space for workers to discuss the challenges they face. We hereby pledge that workers will not be expelled for holding different views to the leadership or the majority of other workers! The Constitution that we envisage will not be a throwback to times gone by but will instead be a living document that guides our actions”, including “a real attempt to build women’s leadership and counter both informal and institutionalised discrimination and sexism”.

This path inevitably brings great theoretical and practical challenges which will not be solved by hot air or academic condescension.

In finding its way forward, this movement will need to cast a critical glance back at its own history in order to benefit from the theory and practice, mistakes and triumphs of past revolutionaries as a foundation for its own creative work.

The task is urgent!
Bob Archer, Jan 2017

The Numsa Moment – Has it lost Momentum?

Martin Jansen

This critique is offered for the union ahead of its next national congress in December 2016 as food for thought towards unlocking Numsa’s historical task that present possibilities

for unifying the working class in struggle, increasing its confidence and steering us towards socialist revolution.

In an interview last year, Floyd Shivambu, the EFF's Deputy President, had this to say in response to Numsa's reluctance to build unity with them, 1 "What we know is that efforts to start a rival socialist or workers' party will dwindle into insignificance and will not benefit the working class and workers whom our ideological allies claim to represent." It has been three years since the historic Numsa moment and it appears that the EFF leader's claim is true. For three years we have not seen any significant mass campaigns or struggles led by Numsa, let alone grassroots mass democratic organisations emerging that have captured working class interests. What are we to make of this?

The "Numsa Moment" was hailed by socialists locally and internationally as the biggest political breakthrough in Southern Africa since the late 1980's. Numsa's special national congress held during December 2013 committed itself to fight and campaign for the most pressing political tasks confronting the working class. These included – to fight and campaign for a militant, independent and unified Cosatu that would of necessity break from the Tripartite Alliance and lead in the establishment of a new United Front (UF) that will co-ordinate struggles in the workplace and communities against neo-liberal policies such as those contained in the ANC government's National Development Plan (NDP) and at the same time explore the establishment of "a movement for socialism". The latter involved a comprehensive study of working class parties all over the world to identify elements "of what may constitute a revolutionary programme for the working class". Importantly, Numsa's *organizational* break with the ANC and SACP was of huge symptomatic and symbolic importance and reflected a sharper working class response to the global economic crisis and rising class tensions in South Africa.

While many socialists correctly supported Numsa's important

watershed political decisions and got directly involved in their realization, they failed at the same time to recognize the historical and current weaknesses of the union and assist in overcoming them. A combination of impressionism and overzealousness saw many socialists jumping in without critically appreciating the challenges of the period and limitations of Numsa and its leadership.

By the following year the union initiated a flurry of activities and events to implement its resolutions. This included national and international conferences and a 6-phase programme of "rolling mass action". The latter focused too narrowly on issues and concerns of the union instead of common issues of all workers and other sections of the working class. The critical Phase 1 of the rolling mass action plan had as its main focus the Employment Tax Incentive Act; beneficiation of all strategic minerals, a ban on the export of scrap metals etc.

These were hardly the issues that could have captured the imagination and concerns of other workers, let alone impoverished sections of the working class. It is hard to fathom why Numsa at the time did not take up the challenge of leading Cosatu's Living Wage Campaign that, with the right approach, could have won over millions of workers in a common

1 Amandla Magazine, Issue No. 42 October 2015, p16.

struggle. This could have connected directly with the struggle of the platinum mineworkers under AMCU and their demand for R12500 per month. Instead, soon after a five-month strike by the mineworkers, two hundred thousand Numsa members went on strike separately in support of their own wage demands.

This was a missed opportunity for building the UF. Moreover, the 6-phase rolling mass action programme should have been changed to ensure that issues more important to the working class, with a greater preparedness on their part to struggle

around, such as for decent housing and service delivery, jobs for the unemployed, free quality education etc. Unsurprisingly, the 6-phase programme has not seen much rolling mass action and faded into oblivion.

Overall, Numsa's key weakness in attempts at implementing their political resolutions was that it underestimated the tasks at hand and overestimated its own strength and ability. While the fact that it claimed to be the biggest union on the continent with over 300000 members, together with correct political decisions presented great potential for political and organizational advances, this by itself was far from enough to accomplish what is required during this period.

Reform versus Revolution

Numsa's biggest impediment that stood and still stands in its way of realizing revolutionary objectives is its history and culture of reformist politics. This legacy of reformism has its roots in the formation of the union in 1987 that brought together various radical and conservative trade union political tendencies and necessitated by unification compromises of the unions' leadership.

By the early 1990's, with the collapse of the Eastern Bloc "socialist" regimes and the political reforms of the Apartheid government, the union had become seeped in various reformist approaches to its work that saw a shift away from the radicalism and militancy of its main predecessor, MAWU, ten years earlier. By this time the Numsa leadership from the various strands had converged around the SACP as its political home and accepted National Democratic Revolution (NDR) as its theoretical perspective for achieving socialism in South Africa and the need for engaging with white monopoly capital and the state for "radical reform" that would move towards a "mixed economy", "high skills and high wages" for workers and an internationally competitive South African economy.

The central vehicle for achieving this by Numsa and its leadership was the Tripartite Alliance and deploying much of its top leadership into the state, including senior government posts by the likes of Alec Erwin who became the minister of trade and industry in the Mbeki cabinet that led the anti-working class neo-liberal programme. In recent years the union and its leadership was even part of the “die for Zuma” bandwagon believing that he would lead an anti-neo-liberal ANC government and revert back to the social democratic and Keynesian RDP and Freedom Charter.

While the 2013 Numsa Moment marked a shift to the left by Numsa, coming on the back of ANC government defeats of Cosatu around E-Tolls, labour brokers, the youth wage subsidy, the NDP and the violent state attacks of the Marikana massacre, the farmworkers’ strike and several service delivery protests as well as the extreme levels of corruption of the state – we did not see a simultaneous fundamental shift away from the reformist politics of the union and its leadership. The union still remained committed to the Stalinist two-stage theory of socialism in the form of the NDR and views as its programme the vague and reformist Freedom Charter.

The Numsa leadership still yearns for the SACP of the era of Joe Slovo instead of bad man Blade Nzimande (current SACP General Secretary and Minister of Higher Education). And yet it was the very Slovo who led the rejection of one of the key tenets of Marxism-Leninism, the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessity to usher in socialism. It was the self-same Slovo who introduced neo-liberal measures of privatisation into the government’s housing policy. It was the same Slovo who proposed the “Sunset clauses” during the negotiations with the Apartheid ruling class that led to the democratic counter-revolution, the results of which are all too clear to see after over 20 years of bourgeois democracy.

Illusions of Restoring the Capitalist Economy to favour the

Working Class

The union still believes in “transforming the economy in line with the Freedom Charter objectives” and believes that South African capitalism can be saved by “broad-based industrial development”. It still views as its road to socialism using the failed social democratic politics and method of radical reform through pressurizing and “engaging the employers and the state”. These approaches are reformist efforts to transform capitalism along social democratic lines. This internationally discredited class collaborationist approach has misled working classes of other countries for decades. Not only is this view fundamentally incorrect, it is also misplaced since it seriously misunderstands where capitalism is today that makes widespread significant material reforms in favour of the working class extremely unlikely.

Various Numsa leaders have since the early 1990’s sowed this illusion, promoting and leading industrial restructuring to ensure that the South African capitalist economy can be “more competitive”. Numsa leaders like Alec Erwin and Adrienne Bird were the prime movers of this reformist approach and ended up directly serving the interest of capital within the Mbeki government.

Prospects for a return to social democratic measures are at an all-time low. Capitalism cannot be reformed in this period of advanced systemic decay. Reformism is itself an expression of the pressure of the ruling capitalist class on the working class and some of its leaders and the union should not continue to succumb to these pressures. A prime example of this phenomenon was when in the wake of the 2008 – 2009 economic crisis, Vavi in symbolic show of unity with white monopoly capital, jointly at a press conference with Bobby Godsell, called on workers to accept wage freezes in order to save jobs and capitalism.

In line with its “red revolutionary character”, Numsa needed

to reject and decisively break from the notion of reforming capitalism since it only serves the interests of monopoly capital and further impoverishes the working class. It cannot be reformed in this period of advanced capitalism. Continuing to hang onto this reformist illusion unnecessarily postpones the revolutionary struggle for socialism. **It is only a revolutionary overthrow of the system that can resolve this crisis in favour of the working class.**

A thorough Political Review was Required

The union, together with its allies and supporters and involving rank and file members, needed to prioritise having the fullest possible political review of its history and politics. In this way it could have enabled us to learn the lessons and chart forward a revolutionary course that should have informed the mass work required for developing the UF and socialist party.

This review should also have entailed an examination of the union and its own operations and all the factors that inhibit and undermine its ability to direct a revolutionary path for building strong mass working class fighting organisations.

This includes problems such as its own bureaucratization (despite its proud legacy of “worker control”), union chauvinism and not connecting with other trade union and rank and file members and working class communities, its conservative collective bargaining arrangements, its participation in the capitalist economy through its investment company, the social distance of the union leadership from its members with the top union officials earning the salaries of senior managers and top state officials etc.

In fact, three years later and there is still very little evidence of Numsa’s own over 300000 rank and file members having been politically inspired and stirred into action by the Numsa moment.

The Current Period, Numsa and the United Front

In order to give Numsa and its allies a clear idea of the tasks in relation to building the UF, the entire union and its allies, especially the rank and file, require an honest and thorough assessment of the state of class struggle and balance of class forces. This will enable us to decide on correct tactics and courses of action to achieve maximum working class unity and strong mass organisations in the process of struggle at local and national levels.

Since the Numsa moment and still now, the mass organisations of the working class remain weak or simply non-existent. The general level of class consciousness has remained low. The "Left" is still weak – small, fragmented with limited implantation within the working class.

Our trade unions are still bureaucratic and politically conservative lifeless shells, not prepared to fight and participate in broader struggles of the working class. This characterization includes the nine unions that originally allied with Numsa, with some of them still in Cosatu and others like the Food and Allied Workers union (FAWU) that has joined to form a new federation.

This weak state of working class organization exist in the context of the continued neo-liberal capitalist ascendancy after more than two decades of economic and political attacks against the working class that has created new structural divisions within it.

Despite the lower middle class also being severely affected by neo-liberalism, its intelligentsia has become disconnected from the working class and disillusioned with radical politics and even shifted to right-wing and conservative politics.

This loss of this "class ally", traditionally socially and politically close to the black working class in South Africa during the Apartheid era, has in turn had a detrimental effect

on working class politics and its capacity to organize. This came on top of a huge creaming off of

several layers of leaders of the mass movement from the early 1990's by the ruling class who offered them lucrative jobs in the state and companies owned by white monopoly capital.

But at the same time the capitalist system remains in deep crisis, especially since the economic collapse of 2008. Since then the ruling class has intensified neo-liberal measures against the working class internationally and in South Africa, thereby forcing more and more people to resist and to organize against the attacks on their living standards and to seek radical solutions.

This means that unlike the 1980's in South Africa, the building material for immediately constructing a mass fighting UF did not exist in abundance and the tasks of Numsa and its allies were enormous. At the same time the Numsa juggernaut had to be politically and organizationally re-orientated to lead and implement the tasks to build the UF and lay the basis for a socialist movement. This could only be achieved through a process of intense organized class struggle and political clarification towards revolutionary Marxism.

The state of the working class during this period can therefore be characterized by a few important features, namely;

- □ Increased structural divisions and atomization of the working class due to the impact of neo-liberalism and a growing insecure precariat constantly in survivalist mode.
- □ Low levels of class consciousness and confidence to consistently engage in class struggle
- □ Weak and low levels of mass based organization
- □ A waning political hegemony over the working class by the ruling tripartite alliance

- □ A growing rebellion against neo-liberalism and deteriorating living and working conditions

But despite this there has been a readiness on the part of the masses to struggle. It is the result of a build-up of frustration over many years with the impact of neo-liberal austerity measures on their lives, deteriorating living standards and disappointment with the corrupt and anti-working class ANC government who they had placed their hopes in for a better life for over two decades.

It is these factors that asserted itself in the revolt of the Platinum miners against the NUM bureaucracy and the wild cat strikes of both the miners and the farm-workers during 2012 – 2013. They are also the underlying cause of the uninterrupted local protests in every part of the country and more recently the #FeesmustFall student movement.

Both this pent up discontent within the working class and the intensification of class antagonisms are intimately linked and were the underlying causes of the constant attacks by the ANC on Vavi and Cosatu at the time, as well as Numsa's break with the ANC and SACP and its eventual expulsion.

Numsa's call for a united front and a "movement for socialism" should therefore have fallen on fertile ground if serious and consistent leadership was offered. These were ideas whose time had come but a sober analysis of the overall relation of forces was required. It is within the rank-and-file of the unions that the pent up discontent runs deepest and the Numsa and UF leadership should have organized that this section of organized workers could rub

shoulders with the youth, unemployed and women who have been in the forefront of the township and village protests country-wide.

What was therefore required was a reassertion of working class political and organizational independence through mass united

front campaigns around the burning questions of the day. Alas this was not to be since 2013.

▪ ***Missed Opportunities for Building the United Front***

The UF approach also meant that Numsa had to do everything in its power to remain within Cosatu and do battle with the reactionary leadership to win over the ordinary members of the other unions to join the UF around the Living Wage and other campaigns. Instead of engaging the rank and file members of the right-wing ANC supporting unions through its own rank and file, the Numsa leaders, its allies and former Cosatu general Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, instead focused on confining the political battle to the Cosatu CEC, the mainstream media and courts. It meant that from the outset in 2011, the workers of the majority of unions in Cosatu were excluded from the important political battle, isolated and disempowered. As mere spectators they did not grow politically and lacked the confidence to challenge and replace their corrupt leaders. This is where the real battle should have been since these workers had been suffering for more than a decade under their unions' leadership who instead of leading struggles, covertly sided with the employers for unmandated wage settlements – especially in the public sector – where they appeased their ANC government masters. Only during the last phase when it became clear that Numsa would be expelled and Vavi dismissed, did the leaders convene shop-steward council meetings to engage the rank and file about some of the issues and even then the unions on the other side were excluded.

For the Numsa leaders and their allies in the Cosatu CEC at the time, the old union adage of, what you don't win on the battlefield will not be won in the boardroom, seemingly did not apply.

▪ ***The Crisis and immediate Possibilities for the mass UF***

Why could Numsa and the myriad of smaller left formations that

initially formed the “United Front” not have entered into a principled united front agreement with the EFF around common political goals? This would have enabled Numsa and other union members connecting with thousands of militant black working class youth in common struggles and opened up revolutionary possibilities. Instead the thousands of EFF members are mere spectators to their leaders’ parliamentary shenanigans and occasional letting off steam mass marches. With such a mass united front in struggle, both the EFF and Numsa leaders’ anti- white monopoly capital rhetoric could have been tested and advanced.

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that the main tenets of the Numsa moment, i.e. the struggle for working class unity (the UF), for a *revolutionary* and socialist workers’ government, and the creation of revolutionary socialist or workers’ party (the movement for socialism) remain relevant. They are interrelated and interdependent aspects of the same process: the self-emancipation and liberation of the working class. However, Numsa has not come close to achieving any of the formations it committed itself to in its 2013 congress political resolutions. This, despite many opportunities presented during the past three years.

- ***Opportunities for the Numsa Moment to live up to the challenge***

The student protest movement that unfolded over the past year signaled the beginning of the end for the ANC regime. Notwithstanding the weaknesses and crudity of their methods, by directing their demands towards national government and activating a national movement, the students have demonstrated tremendous political tenacity. The rest of the working class has taken notice and has drawn this lesson. In future we are likely to see local communities that have engaged in hundreds of militant local struggles around “service delivery” for over a decade, seeking unity with each other and building a national resistance movement similar to the UDF of the 1980’s.

This prospect needs conscious intervention and support in order to be realized and currently only Numsa, its allies and the EFF offer this possibility.

The World and South Africa are experiencing deep and widespread socio-economic and political crises and the situation has degenerated beyond barbarism, especially for the working class and poor. Inequality, the concentration of wealth and poverty are at unprecedented levels. The resultant class conflicts have produced wars, extreme violence, terror and suffering by a rampant western imperialism led by the US, without any alternative revolutionary working class resistance and political leadership. The challenges to the working class abound – with on the one hand, US imperialism setting up military bases in all the regions of the African continent and elsewhere and at the same time within the trade union movement conservative social democracy dominates. South Africa and many countries in the region are faced with political crises, with all the governments of the traditional nationalist parties having lost credibility after years of corruption and repression. However, no revolutionary alternative exist for the masses to belong to and pursue the struggle in line with their historic interests and mission.

The stakes here are high, with the ANC government facing a crisis and implosion. Their hold over the state has increasingly come under threat. In the context of an economy still overwhelmingly dominated by white monopoly capital and the state being the main instrument of wealth accumulation for the ANC aligned new black section of the bourgeoisie, they will resort to extreme measures to hold onto state power. It is not coincidental that the discredited Zuma presidency has ensured that the state security cluster is led by his most trusted allies. Failing a mass revolutionary response supported by strong organization, working class resistance and opposition will be vulnerable to violent repression by the ANC government. Time is not on our side. The need for a genuine

mass united front and revolutionary socialist movement or party is even greater now than in 2013 and cannot be postponed.

Despite its shortcomings, Numsa and the Numsa Moment remain the only real short-term prospects in South Africa for the struggle to form a mass socialist alternative in the process of struggle in response to the crisis and the right-wing backlash that it represents, pregnant with dangers to the working class on all fronts. The union needs to recognize that the real mass working class united front is on the horizon to challenge neo-liberalism and our rulers. It needs to connect with the student movement and local working class struggles to ensure real revolutionary achievement and realise the full potential of the Numsa moment. For this to happen, *its ordinary members* will need to drive tectonic shifts in its politics, organizational culture and orientation – towards the masses, a genuine united front, a mass working class party and socialist revolution.

Jansen is the director and editor of Workers' World Media Productions. He wrote this article in his personal capacity.

Marx falsified and emasculated on the essential question of class

HEWAT BEUKES responds to an article in the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper

The article reproduced below expressing the class position of

an Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) MP appeared in the Mail & Guardian newspaper in South Africa. Ironically, it is an article which exposes the tribal petit bourgeois method of dividing the working class. We need to answer this article in its essential conjectures.

A cursory perusal of Marx's writings will show that it is simply not true that Marx deliberately glossed over the race question. In fact Marx showed in all its profoundness that where national and/or race oppression is present the working class can only emancipate itself after the freedom of the race and/or the nation. Lenin took this further in his "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination" by showing that the working class can only unite and emancipate itself through a conscious struggle against such race and/or national oppression.

It is in this vein that Trotsky gave the choice to the South African white workers, either with the black working class or with imperialism. More cannot be said of the Marxist attitude to racism and particular oppression of sections of the class.

Karl Marx examined the historical development of human society as a scientist with the aim of acting upon it to change it, not only to interpret it. In the process he uncovered amongst others, the social forces and the laws driving this development. Amongst them, he identified the central force as the struggle of the classes.

In capitalism he examined the process of the creation of value. He laid bare the social and property relations engendered by this capitalist production process of commodities. He examined the essential contradictory nature of these social and property relations which drives the conflict between the classes. He examined in the most minute detail the nature of labour including wage and chattel slavery and their impact on production of wealth, and the struggle of the working class. He even distinguished between the form and

economic effects of ancient slavery and the trade with African slaves.

In his studies and analysis of class he did not find the national and/or race question a separate issue of interest, but a fundamental issue to be overcome by the revolutionary working class movement as of objective necessity of which moral or any other subjective considerations would naturally be concomitant, but not the departure.

This becomes clear in the following two quotes from Marx:

Letter of K. Marx to A. Vogt in New York London April 9, 1870:
But the English bourgeoisie has, besides, much more important interests in Ireland's present-day economy. Owing to the constantly increasing concentration of tenant-farming, Ireland steadily supplies its own surplus to the English labor market, and thus forces down wages and lowers the moral and material condition of the English working class. And most important of all! Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude towards him is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the negroes in the former slave states of the U.S.A. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is

*the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it. But the evil does not stop here. It continues across the ocean. The antagonism between English and Irish is the hidden basis of the conflict between the United States and England. It makes any honest and serious co-operation between the working classes of the two countries impossible. It enables the governments of both countries, whenever they think fit, to break the edge off the social conflict by their mutual bullying, and, in case of need, by war with one another. England, being the metropolis of capital, the power which has hitherto ruled the world market, is for the present the most important country for the workers' revolution, and moreover the only country in which the material conditions for this revolution have developed up to a certain degree of maturity. Therefore to hasten the social revolution in England is the most important object of the International Workingmen's Association. **The sole means of hastening it is to make Ireland independent.***

Excerpt from K. Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. I (Chapter X, Section 7) *"In the United States of North America, every independent movement for the workers was paralyzed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. **Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.** But out of the death of slavery a new life at once arose. **The first fruit of the Civil War was the eight hours' agitation that ran with the seven-leagued boots of the locomotive from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.***

It is clear from these quotes that to eliminate the race and national questions from Marxian science of class analysis is to stultify it, to pour concrete in its joints and render it meaningless and a futile exercise as in terms of Marx himself no revolution will emancipate the wage slave without addressing race and national oppression.

The EFF MP's position therefore seeks no less than to

emasculate Marxism as the science of working class struggle and revolution. It seeks to do so without facts, by disregarding the written fact and replace it with fiction. It is the petit bourgeois method of renouncing Marx and Marxism.

Fanon was not a Marxist. He treated racism as a thing in itself, some inherent psychological response from whites against blacks. He could perhaps be described as a black nationalist in essence. He was not concerned with the economic implications of racism and its relation to and effect on the class struggle. He was occupied by racism as an empirical manifestation, and not by racial exploitation as a variant form of labour for the creation of value, and he brought to bear on it subjective evaluations rather than scientifically founded expositions.

Two quotes illustrate this point:

“The Negro enslaved by his inferiority, the white man enslaved by his superiority alike behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.”

“When people like me, they like me “in spite of my color.” When they dislike me; they point out that it isn’t because of my color. Either way, I am locked in to the infernal circle.”

It is clear that Fanon either did not read Marx, did not understand him or simply disregarded his work. From the Marxian quotes above it is clear that Fanon could not form a Triad with Marx and Lenin. Moreover, he does not approach the race question as an analyst or scientist, but as a victim.

The end result was as it is with all revisions, distortions and perversions of science, he could not put forward a relevant programme for the emancipation of the colonial working classes. With such a psychological baggage Fanon could not possibly reach at internationalism as a precondition for working class (and race) emancipation. He landed at guerrillaism of the peasantry, a class which Marxists consider

the breeding place of individualist production, the embryo of capitalism if it develops outside the leadership control of the working class.

This was the model on which Southern African liberation movements built their incumbencies with dire consequences for the working class. This was done in full approval of the imperialists. In a central square in Harare a huge statue of a peasant with a sickle in his hand stare fiercely and derisively down on workers passing through or having their meals. The radio and media used to lambast them for their purported bourgeois values and individualism while the peasants had selflessly sacrificed for independence. It was never true. In Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique the urban proletariat provided the centralisation and organisation for the liberation movement. Due to the need to scupper national self-determination imperialism and Stalinism wrested control away from them.

The intimation from black or race nationalists that imperialism and capitalism had some innate psychological partiality to race is belied by history of South Africa itself: During the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902 about 30,000 Boers mostly women and children died in the British concentration camps. Nothing equalled this in the 400-year colonial history of South Africa in terms of racial brutality. It was surpassed in extent only in neighbouring Namibia during 1904-8 with the near extermination of the Herero and the Nama nations for resisting subjugation and exploitation and not on the basis of racist compulsions.

The ease of the merger of black and white in their collective exploitation of the black and white workers and their collective hatred of the black working class as revealed in Marikana put the issue beyond doubt.

This is actually a phenomenon which was not understood by Fanon. Throughout the several hundred-year epoch of capitalist

race exploitation, the emergent African feudal and tribal ruling classes were an indispensable part of that process. Basil Davidson in his "In The Eye of the Storm" relates how the ruling castes of the Central African Kingdom amongst others traded with slaves with European colonisers of the Americas. Likewise imperialism in post-colonial Southern Africa needed the tribal royalties and black petit bourgeoisie for its continuation.

We now turn to South Africa itself. The issues surrounding "black consciousness" – the central theme of the article – have been wracking Southern Africa since around 1970. A black consciousness movement which rejected any compromise with the white ruling class took root at the time. Steve Bantu Biko became its iconic leader. It essentially shunned class analyses, but it demanded no less than a proportional appropriation of the economic resources as a basis of any conciliation between white and black.

This militant black nationalism was counteracted by a "non-racial" alliance of black nationalists and the liberal bourgeoisie which eclipsed black consciousness in the 1980's with the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), an ANC front. (During this period the ANC and the SWAPO were liquidating thousands of young activists in exile including the youth who had fled Namibia during 1974 and South Africa in 1976 and its aftermath.) The UDF's black-white unity was condition less and they eclipsed the militants which had no class analysis and defence for their purported "reverse racism" against the former's pragmatic unity. Of course, factors that assisted in the demise of the militants were the billions pumped into the promotion of the bourgeois alliance by imperialism, through the Anti-Apartheid Movement and physical elimination. Steve Biko is the most notable example of this physical annihilation by the South African State.

Epigones of the black consciousness proponents remain in South Africa. But, unlike their progenitors, they are eclectic and

responsible for the attempts to fragment the working class in tribal and national groups and strata. Of course this is inevitable if one responds to class oppression in race and tribal terms. This position has much to do with the outlook of the petit bourgeoisie in general, the tribal petit bourgeoisie in particular.

There can be no doubt that the production of surplus value and its expropriation is the central objective of the capitalist. There can thus be no doubt that racial exploitation of labour is a sub-relation of class exploitation.

But, in South Africa there is no longer exploitation based on race enforced by law.

There remain no institutional obstacles to the unity of the South African working class.

The task is now to strengthen the United Front with NUMSA and to take it forward to build a revolutionary party for Southern Africa which shall seek unity with the international working class movement. This unity will be obtained within the struggle to redeem the true history of the working class.

By Hewat Beukes, Oct. 2014

From:

<http://mg.co.za/article/2014-09-26-class-theory-finally-decolonised>

“Class theory finally decolonized

26 Sep 2014 00:00 [Andile Mngxitama](#)

Fanon creates a triad with Marx and Lenin, to help the EFF reclaim class from its racist foundations.

We need Frantz Fanon, the black thinker of anti-racism, to keep in check the European sensibilities of the first two (Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx) in the holy triumvirate.

(Supplied)

Ironically, “class” a putatively combative analytical category in the Marxian tradition, has been one of the most effective means to hide race oppression in racist and colonial societies.

This claim would surprise many because class, as a Marxist tool of analysis, seeks to identify more precisely the workings of capitalism and also to identify the social strata imbued with the capacity and interest to carry out the task of being the “grave diggers” of capitalism – those who would usher in the socialist society where suffering will cease to exist. That was Karl Marx’s fantasy in any event.

The problem is that Marx was trapped in the Eurocentric, anti-black racism of his time. This truth is part of the DNA of his philosophy. Marx’s racist, mechanical thinking on the movement of history leads him to call for the colonisation of nonEuropean worlds to hasten the march towards communist nirvana. So, the foundation of class theory is anti-black.

Class analysis needs be decolonised and subjected to anti-racist analysis if it’s going to serve black people. The hegemony of white thought has ensured the acceptance of class unquestioningly. In our universities, which are dominated by Western thought, class is seen as a scientific category, whereas race is considered a mere epiphenomena, a derivative of class, or even a non-category of “social constructionism”.

From the above, the conclusion is drawn that race does not exist. Blacks cease to exist because, as we hear, class is the fundamental contradiction. But black radical thinkers such as Frank Wilderson have shown that class cannot account fully for black suffering, which exceeds the capitalist exploitation and alienation that affect white workers.

Black suffering also includes “fungibility”, the idea that one doesn’t just sell one’s labour power as white workers do, but

that one is sold as a commodity. White workers could buy themselves a black person off an auction block during the days of slavery, and they are known to have done so. This is over and above the fact that white workers benefit from the exploitation of blacks.

In South Africa, the early Afrikaner proletariat had access to the slave labour of Africans. Basically, they were workers who owned workers; the story of inboekselings – the African slaves of the trekboere – is still to be told.

Bad history

In South Africa, class reductionism has a bad history. White Marxists insisted on it as a choice weapon to avoid accounting for their complicity in black oppression. Often, the insistence on class instead of race in anti-black, racist societies actually meant the defence of the settler colony.

In South Africa this led to the bizarre situation where black people were trained to deny white oppression and say they were oppressed by an abstract, impersonal “system”, not white people.

This saw guerrilla insurgents sent back from exile at great personal risk to destroy “economic installations” and to take care not to harm white people in the process.

We ended with a war without a war when on the side of the white oppressor, the black person was the actual subject of exploitation and violent repression, as demonstrated by the occupation of the townships by the army and police, hit squads and long-term jail sentences, if not capital punishment. White oppression was personal, the Marxist response was impersonal.

There is a bitter truth to face: to be a class warrior or even a Marxist doesn't mean one is above anti-black racism. The dramatic resignation of Aimé Césaire from the French Communist Party in 1957 shows this reality in clear terms.

Césaire, who was protesting the reality that Marxism was put to racist use, poignantly stated: "What I want is that Marxism and communism be placed in the service of black people, and not black people in the service of Marxism and communism."

At times when listening to black people who have assumed Marxism, one can't fail to notice how their entry to the thought process requires that they deny themselves as black people.

Triad of Marx, Lenin and Fanon

Up to now difficulties of class theory have not been decisively resolved. The self-description by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) as a "Marxist-Leninist-Fanonian" party presents a refreshing attempt to decolonise the anti-capitalist struggle. This triad of Marx, Lenin and Frantz Fanon is recognition that Marxist-Leninism in racist societies falls short of the task of emancipation.

We need Fanon, the black thinker of anti-racism, to keep in check the European sensibilities of the first two in the holy triumvirate.

As far as we know, it's the first time that a political movement has explicitly expressed its ideological framework in this way.

Fanon, a student of Césaire, was to turn the Marxist schema upside down, almost as profoundly as Marx had done with Friedrich Hegel.

Fanon argued that in colonial settings, "Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched" because, he argued, "the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich".

The EFF's ideological innovation introduces a productive tension that may contribute towards developing a theory and

practice of emancipation that reclaims class from its racist foundations and decolonises it in the service of black emancipation.

Class is too important to be left to racists to misuse at will in the defence of white supremacy.

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