

What We Can Learn From The Crisis in NUMSA

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa is not just any old union. It was built by black industrial workers fighting exploitation by multinationals keen to use the repressive, racist apartheid regime to secure super-profits. It was built with support and advice from Marxist activists. These workers asserted themselves as an independent revolutionary force, quickly grasped the core ideas of socialism, and fearlessly fought to bring down the whole apartheid system. They established workers' democracy as the working principle of their union.

The settlement which ended apartheid rule in the early 1990s cheated these militant workers of the opportunity to take the road to a socialist South Africa. An alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) not only dropped any socialist policy (such as nationalising the mining and metal-refining industries, returning the land to the toilers who work it, etc.); it actually forged ahead with a policy of widespread selling-off of public utilities. At the same time, the leaders of this alliance neglected no opportunity to enrich themselves.

For over 20 years, the triple alliance was actually able to ride out any working-class opposition which was provoked as a succession of government policy initiatives failed to provide progress in jobs, welfare and living conditions or in mass black access to education and agricultural land.

Working-class resistance was reflected in internal wrangles within the alliance and the regular-rapid turnover in national

Presidents, with Thabo Mbeki replaced by Jacob Zuma and Zuma in turn replaced by the former miners' union leader, Cyril Ramaphosa. Each successive incumbent became mired in accusations of corruption and incompetence.

Working-class resistance broke out into the open in the middle of 2012 with the shooting by the South African Police Service of thirty-four striking miners at Marikana and the subsequent wave of industrial militancy.

Correctly identifying this as a pivotal moment in the class struggle in South Africa, NUMSA convened a Special Congress in December 2013 which undertook a serious campaign to re-establish a socialist and internationalist workers' movement. The decisions of this Special Congress are summarised at What Numsa decided in December 2013 – wirfi (workersinternational.info).

These Special Congress decisions amounted to a carefully considered understanding of a way forward to revive the workers' movement, workers' democratic organisation and workers' political power as a class.

However, progress along the lines sketched out at the Special Congress has been far from smooth. Old mistakes and embedded illusions have persisted in the very leadership of this trade union. This leadership is quick to point out the failings of post-apartheid rule but has never really taken on board any analysis of the real lessons of these failures. They have therefore neglected many of the decisions of the December 2013 Special Congress and taken the union in quite a different direction from the one chosen by delegates.

Differences over these matters have led to a crisis within the trade union. This came to a head over preparations for the 11th National Congress of the Union slated to start on 25 July 2022. An opposition group of political activists alleged serious abuses of democratic process by the national

leadership of General Secretary Irvin Jim in the course of local and regional gatherings to discuss policies and select and mandate delegates. Leading figures in this opposition – all elected office bearers at various levels within the union – went to court and obtained a ruling that the Congress should not go ahead. The majority of the national leadership of the union nevertheless went ahead with the Congress. They obtained a ruling from another court that some slight last-minute changes they made were adequate to meet the terms of the previous injunction.

A Secretariat Report to the NUMSA NEC Meeting held on 28 and 28 October 2022 reveals at some length the attitude, orientation and methods of the current NUMSA leadership. This Secretariat Report makes no direct or systematic attempt to defend this leadership against any of the charges made against it. It is nevertheless worth studying, as it reveals some very basic weaknesses and problematic attitudes in that leadership, as well as underhand ways of dealing with political problems. The underlying roots of the problems in the leadership of the union, the reasons why an opposition had to arise and challenge this leadership can be traced and identified by analysing aspects of this Secretariat Report. This present article delves into some of this.

A dishonest slander

The report comes, in effect, from the office of the General Secretary of the union, Irvin Jim. It is a robust and obstinate attempt to justify the current leadership of the union, but it does not provide any systematic analysis of the crisis in the union and the soil out of which it grew. In the places where it does deal with that background, the report actually reveals the author's own political weaknesses and mistakes, but by then a far murkier objective has been attempted.

From the very start of the report, the opposition within the

union is repeatedly described as “individuals”. It is never referred to as what it actually is: a strong and rooted trend which is an organic part of NUMSA’s history and a source of the union’s strength.

The word “individual” has a very specific weight in a workers’ organisation, especially one allegedly guided by Marxism. To describe opponents systematically and repeatedly as “individuals” is to place them outside of and at odds with the collective of a workers’ organisation. This is doubly deceptive here since all the “individuals” involved have been fighting consistently for nothing more than the collective rights of the working-class membership of the union, enshrined in its constitution and methods. Their complaints have all related to breaches of the constitution and departure from the methods of workers’ democracy on the part of the Irvin Jim leadership.

The opposition has produced various statements, submissions and appeals which present a devastating picture of financial chicanery, abuses and constitutional breaches on the part of the union leadership. The Secretariat Report brazenly reproduces a number of these with barely any comment or analysis and certainly no detailed rebuttal. The only “argument” involved is the kind of subliminal propaganda that the advertising industry has mastered. The unspoken but clear message is: “How dare these ‘individuals’ raise their voices at all! What insolence on their part! What saboteurs and wreckers!”.

As the Secretariat Report goes on, the “individuals” become, bit by bit, a “group of individuals”, and a little later “a group of individuals inside the union”, but working insidiously to undermine it; a “group of individuals” who are feted in various media outlets (and therefore obviously work hand-in-glove with the class enemy), and so on.

One hundred pages later, the Report works itself up into a

climax. The opposition becomes “a loud hailer for anti-NUMSA right-wingers, speaking rubbish about NUMSA and believing that they could change NUMSA policies and constitutional decisions through some Cape Town television studio called ‘Workers World Media’.” It goes on: “To be blunt we have allowed ourselves as the union through our good heart and generosity to be abused by a tiny, loony, racist white left that has no relationship with the working class as a result of being open to everyone who claim to advance the interests of the working class”. (The opposition justifiably points out that they are fighting FOR the carrying out of the decisions of the 2013 Special Congress and that the NUMSA leadership has abandoned these decisions and gone off in a different direction. The accusation of racism a vile slander).

All this abuse is piled on in order to avoid addressing the very serious accusations of wrongdoing which are detailed in the various opposition documents actually copied into the Report. It is all very well to brag about “NUMSA policies and constitutional decisions”, but pointless unless you actually address the reality of the complaints about branch-stacking meetings with unelected “delegates”, sending thugs to disorganise union meetings and so forth.

The slander comes to a spittle-laden climax: “it is important to raise everybody’s level of consciousness about NUMSA as an organisation and refocus our energies towards what NUMSA has always been, a preparatory school for class struggles and fighting against the system of capitalism in pursuit of socialism”. This is bound up with “characterising and deepening our understanding about **the forces that have consistently plunged the organisation, putting it under siege and causing instability**”. Part of such a struggle has to do with being firm and not being liberal and being prepared to call a spade a spade” (My emphasis – BA).

What an insult to the very concepts of “consciousness”, “class struggles”, “fighting capitalism” and “pursuit of socialism”!

The Secretariat Report **implies** that the opposition is guilty of treachery and malice, but utters not a single **political** word or idea in characterising that opposition.

In fact, the Secretariat Report has no political answer to the charges raised by the opposition within the union. The Report is reduced to name-calling in a style that would have made old Andrey Vyshinsky proud – that lying, slandering and cold-bloodedly murderous prosecutor at the notorious Moscow Trials in the 1930s. “A preparatory school for class struggles and fighting against the system of capitalism in pursuit of socialism” is indeed what a trade union can and should be. However, while the methods and conceptions of the Irvin Jim leadership remain Stalinist, that leadership will train and educate not class-conscious proletarian fighters, but sheep with no mind of their own, bleating the meaningless phrases inculcated into them by their leaders.

There is also no direct reply to the allegations that the business interests attached to the union are not serving their intended functions and are instead used for the benefit of individual leaders and to buy influence among union members. Instead, the Report announces that “We can report to the NEC that we have met the necessary compliance and we have made a submission to the Department of Employment and Labour and have committed to respond to the pack of lies championed by faceless people who speak on the basis of anonymity, when clearly their mission is to destroy NUMSA and put it under administration”. So, there is the promise to “respond” to the Department of Employment and Labour, but no proper response to the union delegates and members!

At the same time, the Report announces there will be special training for local and regional officials of the union to keep systematic minutes and financial records, as if they were to blame for the alleged abuses.

Stalinism a counter-revolutionary force in the working class

From out of the tomb, Stalinism extends a ghostly hand whose touch threatens to wither the promising green shoots of a working-class revival. The current leadership of NUMSA is making a hash of the course of action established at the union's Special Congress in December 2013 because it does not grasp the problems presented to the working class by the bureaucratic, mechanical and authoritarian methods and conceptions bred under Stalin's rule in the USSR. These are the methods and conceptions which shaped the character of the SACP-ANC-Cosatu alliance which assumed rule over South Africa after 1990. Even three decades after the collapse of the USSR these methods and conceptions still have a remarkable grip on the workers' movement.

The Bolshevik Party built and led by Lenin engaged in a dogged and profound struggle to master theoretical problems in order to provide clear, correct and reliable guidance to workers and the broader masses at every evolving stage in their struggle. That struggle itself presents a constantly shifting and changing picture as different social forces square off against each other. For the Bolsheviks, loyalty to Marxist theory was not at all a slavish and silent subservience to a line imposed from above. Even working under conditions of illegality and the risk of imprisonment, exile and death, Bolsheviks arrived at their political policies and practices in a process of discussion. Those who claim to be Marxist leaders had to – and still must – justify that assertion by honestly accounting for the outcomes of the policies they propose. This is not “liberalism” but a necessary attribute of revolutionary organisation.

A very different relationship between party leaders and strategy and tactics took root after Lenin's death. Once a bureaucracy had usurped state power in the Soviet Union, and extended its grip over the Communist Parties around the world, policies and tactics became subordinate to the needs of the Soviet leadership at any given time. It was in this process

that workers became accustomed, under duress, to adopting uncritically whatever the Party Line might be at any given moment, however much that line contradicted the Party Line the day before and the day after. The methods and practices of purges, frame-up trials and the Gulag had their impact in parties and trade unions run by supporters of the Russian (and later Chinese) leadership across the world.

We have room here for just a few examples of the problems caused by the bureaucratic approach: Finding reliable allies for revolutionary Communists workers in their struggles (and knowing exactly how reliable they are and for how long) is a question of immense importance for our movement. Under Lenin, the Communist International developed the tactic of the United Front in order to overcome the grip of reformist socialist parties on the working class. However, in the hands of the new leadership in Russia in the mid-1920s, the tactic of the United Front became a reckless reliance upon agreements with the more radical trade union leaders in Britain and with Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Guo Min Dang in China, fighting the warlords who dominated large parts of the country. What should have been necessary temporary alliances were kept going even as the right wing of the Guo Min Dang slaughtered Chinese Communist workers in their thousands and the British TUC leaders closed down the 1926 General Strike after 9 days.

At the same time, the Soviet government was prolonging far beyond its shelf-life the "New Economic Policy" which had been adopted as a necessary but temporary path to economic recovery after the terrible destruction inflicted upon Russia during World War I and the civil war following the revolution.

By the end of the 1920s, the richer peasants in the USSR were starting to stir up opposition to the Soviet state in the countryside. Faced with setbacks to its policies at home and abroad, the bureaucracy turned to its notorious "class against class" policies of the so-called "Third Period". The world revolution was proclaimed to be imminent. Reformist socialists

were all denounced as traitors and as “twins” of fascism. War was declared on the entire Soviet peasantry in the form of the murderous forced collectivisation of agriculture. Communist workers in many countries around the world isolated themselves from other members of their own class by adopting a string of sectarian practices and actions.

Policy zig-zags

The “Third Period”, described above, made any united resistance to fascism by socialist and communist workers impossible and led directly to the defeat of the German working class in 1933 at the hand of the Nazis. The response of the Soviet bureaucracy was to switch abruptly to a policy of alliances with “democratic” capitalist states and “popular fronts” with the reformist socialist and radical bourgeois politicians who had so recently been denounced as “twins” of fascism.

Even in the early 1920s, the Stalinist-leadership of the Communist movement had already abandoned any hope of the revolution spreading around the world. Communist policy internationally was reduced to any initiative that might strengthen the hand of the bureaucracy in its grip on its home territory in the USSR and its negotiations with Western capitalist governments. Stalinism had at times a radical, demagogic face and at times a face turned towards the democratic bourgeoisie (or even, at times, to German Nazism). What it never really had was a genuinely revolutionary Marxist conception of really revolutionary tactics.

Each switch to a new “line” led to the expulsion or resignation of some in the party who had believed too firmly in the previous one. Where the Soviet leadership held sway, that could lead to imprisonment and death. The question for those who found themselves in that position was and is: do they understand the political roots of the degeneration which hit them? Many have not. This seems to be particularly the

case with Irvin Jim. He split noisily with other members of the South African Communist Party nearly ten years ago over the obvious failures of the South African ANC government. Now he seems to be keen to patch up differences, and looks to the possibility of working with the SACP on the issues which he raises in the Secretariat Report.

His split was not thought through to the end. The Secretariat Report reveals massive illusions in the revolutionary potential of the SACP and its traditions. It refers to the 1969 Morogoro conference of the ANC, called to deal with frustration in the ranks of the SACP and Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the movement. Chris Hani and others had been suspended for voicing their radical criticism of the passivity of the ANC. At the conference, the protests of Hani and others were headed off with revolutionary-sounding bluster from Joe Slovo, the very Slovo whose rhetoric is quoted approvingly in the NUMSA Secretariat Report to the October 2022 National Executive Committee. Back in 1969, the suspended activists trooped tamely back into the ANC, which adopted a *Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress* document, drafted by Slovo.

While acknowledging generally “an international context of transition to the socialist system”, the text of *Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress* emphasises: “We in South Africa are part of the zone in which national liberation is the chief content of the struggle”. It emphasises the obstacles to national liberation throughout southern Africa at that time (1969), and insists that “The strategy and tactics of our revolution require for their formulation and understanding a full appreciation of the interlocking and interweaving of international, African and Southern African developments which play on our situation”. Thus, the struggle of the masses in the colonies of the time is severed from the movement of the working class in the imperialist powers of the day and firmly placed under the control of middle-class black

liberation leaders. Diplomatic and strategic considerations which are said to be beyond the grasp of ordinary workers and activists mean that only "the leadership" is equipped to judge what strategy and tactics are appropriate.

The section which refers to "Unending Resistance to White Domination" hails the "emergence and development of the primary organisation of the liberation movement – the African National Congress", as well as groups representing "the Coloured and the Indians" and "the creation of economic and political organisations – the South African Communist Party and trade unions which reflected the special aims and aspirations of the newly developed and doubly oppressed working class". This whole schema conceals the fact that "unending resistance" on the part of the black middle-class and tribal leaders not only experienced long periods of slumber, but also had a different aim and social content from that of black worker, which are relegated to "special aims and aspirations".

There follows very extensive logic-chopping about an "armed struggle" which barely ever got off the ground in South Africa itself. Slovo here is anxious to defend the ANC against accusations that "they were not really revolutionary or that it was only in the early '60s that they began to appreciate the correct strategy ... in other words was its policy not a revolutionary one?" Clearly, critical voices in the SACP had said something very much along these lines. Slovo's answer is to explain that "radical changes are brought about not by imaginary forces but by those whose outlook and readiness to act is very much influenced by historically determined factors". He goes on: "To ignore the real situation and to play about with imaginary forces, concepts and ideals is to invite failure. The art of revolutionary leadership consists in providing leadership to the masses and not just to its most advanced elements; it consists of setting a pace which accords with the objective conditions and the real possibilities at

hand". (*Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress*, 1969)

The problem with all these wise words is that the decision about what "objective conditions and the real possibilities at hand" really are, what tactics might be appropriate, and when, is left to the "political leadership" which has already been vested in the African National Congress, and the ANC is what Lenin used to call a 'bourgeois nationalist' movement with its own aims and objectives quite different from those of black workers. Stalinist policy (as expressed by Joe Slovo) had already walled-off "national liberation" struggles from the struggles of workers in developed capitalist countries and now it placed the struggles of workers in colonial countries (as mere "special aims and interests") under the control of a movement expressing the aspirations of a black elite.

And today the result of that is notorious. Thirty years of ANC rule in South Africa have brought all the abuses for the working class that the 2013 Special Congress statements and resolutions and even the current Secretariat Report detail. But the response of the Secretariat Report is to evoke the voice of Chris Hani, who tamely submitted to the terms of *Strategy and Tactics of the African National Congress* and returned to the Stalinist fold. One is justified in suspecting that, despite all the bluster, that is exactly what the current leadership of NUMSA is planning to do.

Despite the sharp break with the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance in 2012-13, the current leadership of NUMSA never broke, as a whole, with the Stalinist politics in which that alliance was rooted. The Secretariat Report flays the ANC rhetorically:

" ... the ANC for more than two decades squandered and missed what an opportunity given its revolutionary history of class struggle as the only guarantee for fundamental change".

And:

“At the back of the country’s minerals what the ANC failed to do was to champion manufacturing and industrialisation through a job-led industrial strategy”.

And:

“the African majority has remained economically marginalised pursuing this campaign to influence the ANC ...”.

And, most tellingly about the illusions this leadership of NUMSA still harbours about the whole historic policy of alliance with the ANC:

“This means in our country that racism and apartheid in our country’s economy has continued by other means in that the African majority has remained economically marginalized, landless, and disposed. In pursuing this campaign to influence the ANC which must be understood in its proper context that we were not calling on the ANC to adopt a new revolutionary line, we were simply calling on the ANC to stick to its liberation vision which can be characterised as the true essence of the national democratic revolution as the ANC once claimed it was pursuing. During such a difficult phase when we were being purged by the ANC led alliance, constituted by the ANC, SACP and COSATU, before they expelled us in 2014 we consistently reminded them of the following quote from the Morogoro Conference in 1969. Of course, we knew that Chris Hani, for doing the same, was viciously punished for agitating for convening of the Morogoro Conference of 1969 through the infamous memo which he was extremely hated for penning it which led to him being sentenced to jail for 6 months. Below is what we consistently reminded them of: *‘In our country – more than in any other part of the oppressed world – it is inconceivable for liberation to have meaning without a return of the wealth of the land to the people as a whole. It is therefore a fundamental feature of our strategy that victory must embrace more than formal political democracy. To allow existing economic forces to retain their interests intact, is*

to feed the root of racial supremacy, and does not represent even the shadow of liberation. Our drive towards national emancipation is, therefore, in a very real way bound up with economic emancipation.' **Morogoro Conference 1969"**

And yet, in the face of the SACP and ANC leadership at Morogoro, this same Chris Hani could not put any content into the fine words about "the return of the wealth of the land to the people as a whole". He backed down and was accepted back into the fold, as a tame sheep. And that was just an anticipation of the treachery of the ANC, the SACP, and their various backers and patrons at the beginning of the 1990s

After more than sixty years, is it not time to draw the lesson that not only the ANC, but the SACP too, is a busted flush? The SACP never took forward any serious fight of the working class in South Africa that challenged the ANC. The reasons for that lie deeply embedded in the political culture inculcated by Stalinism. The workers' movement needs to actually draw out the lessons of its own history, overcome Stalinism in theory and practice, and on the basis of that re-assessment take a genuinely revolutionary road. The illusions peddled by the Secretariat Report show that nothing essential has been learned from history by the current leadership of NUMSA. No talk of "vanguarding ourselves" has any value; all bragging about "consciousness" is but "a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal", empty noise unless the speaker can understand and deal with the essential nature of Stalinism and its break with Leninism.

Back in 2012 and 2013, NUMSA correctly aligned itself with the growing working-class opposition to the Alliance of ANC, SACP and the union confederation COSATU. Within COSATU, NUMSA pressed for a break with the alliance, stood their ground and only moved to set up the new trade union federation (SAFTU) when they were expelled from COSATU for their principled stance. Now that COSATU too has been pushed by the working class to pass a motion of no confidence in the ANC, the

vacillating top leadership of NUMSA seeks reconciliation with the very same political forces from which it was forced to break in 2013.

Now, unity of the workers' movement in practice is a fundamentally vital issue in the struggle, if we are to talk seriously about strategy and tactics that can lead to victory. NUMSA and SAFTU should indeed be exploring how to find unity in action with trade unions still affiliated to COSATU, and even with supporters of the SACP. At best, this could lead to serious gains for genuinely revolutionary socialists, and at worst (if COSATU etc. will not join or later back out) it will clarify in the eyes of wider groups of workers who they can trust and who they cannot trust.

What kind of organisation?

The real problem with the hand which the NUMSA leadership extends to the SACP is the conception of working-class revolutionary organisation which the current NUMSA leadership appears to have brought with it from its days in the SACP. We saw earlier that at the outcome of the Morogoro conference, Hani and Slovo both joined in the chorus that the leadership knows best and that the "individual" must accept that the "leadership" is the true and correct voice of the rank-and-file members. Irvin Jim appears to be stuck in the same place

In Lenin's hands, strategy and tactics were, first of all, connected with genuine commitment to the revolutionary role of the working class. It is with that aim in mind that it becomes vital to actually know and understand reality as it changes and develops. The "line" – the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary party – was for Lenin grounded in an unyielding determination to bring theoretical knowledge to bear in order to guide the struggle for socialism, not in a bureaucratic desire to protect one's own power and privileges. Strategy and tactics had to provide the party members, the working class and the masses, with an opportunity to test and judge party

policies and decisions. Working-class organisations such as leading and local party committees, trades union workplace groups, branches and districts should not be there just to rubber-stamp leadership decisions but to provide an arena for debate. Support for a particular party and leadership should be based on the test of experience and cannot be imposed by rhetoric and shouted assertions. Strategy and tactics should help equip workers with the consciousness needed to abolish capitalism.

Political education

At the heart of the NUMSA October 2022 Secretariat Report are empty words, dressed up with rhetorical references to really significant matters and torn-out-of-context. At one point the Secretariat Report makes a fleeting allusion to Lenin's little book *What Is To Be Done?*. Interestingly, this reference comes just before a long series of reports on NUMSA successes in negotiations with employers, as the Secretariat Report lulls the delegates present with encouraging reports, assuring them that industrial matters are not being neglected and that the union leadership is doing a good job in defending members interests.

Anybody who has actually studied the pamphlet in question, *What Is To Be Done?*, will know that in this early work Lenin expressed his concern about "only trade-unionism". At the time Lenin was a leading member of a party that belonged to the Second (Socialist) International. He had learned from the revolutionary leaders of the Second International (whom he respected in their best days) like Kautsky and Plekhanov that in their experience (based largely in western Europe) the opposition to revolutionary politics within the movement, the reformist wing of the socialist party, rested largely upon leading trade-unionists. In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin goes to great lengths to argue that the backbone of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party he was helping to set up under extremely oppressive conditions in Tsarist Russia should be

provided by resolute and competent “professional” revolutionaries totally dedicated to that vocation, rather than trade union officials. However, he never expected workers to automatically and passively accept every “line” that was handed down. He also insisted that workers should always be encouraged to set their sights much higher than immediate (and of course essential) questions of wages and conditions and focus on how they can make their political strength and influence felt. In *What Is To Be Done* Lenin frequently expressed contempt for theoreticians who believed that revolutionary class-consciousness arises in the humdrum daily struggle over wages and conditions, without a sharp and conscious struggle for socialist theory. And a real struggle for socialist theory involves a lot more than passively and uncritically absorbing teachings from above.

We must say a word about the way, since the Russian Revolution and the establishment of the Communist International, that this pamphlet (*What Is To Be Done?*) has been misused and abused by both Stalinist and bourgeois thinkers. Mistaken ideas about this have had an influence on all parts of the workers’ and socialist movement. The idea has been spread that, without actually earning it and just by virtue of their position, self-proclaimed Communist leaders deserve the right to act like petty dictators, to silence opponents in their own ranks and in the wider working class where they have influence, and to decree and impose this or that strategy, tactic or policy without letting the rank-and file have any say.

This certainly did not reflect Lenin’s own thinking, and in 1920 when he published another pamphlet, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*), he used the opportunity to correct the impression and explain that Communist leaders can only enjoy the support of the masses to the extent that these masses can see out of their own experience that the leaders’ proposals and programmes make sense.

The Secretariat Report talks a lot about “being the vanguard”, “vanguarding ourselves” and “political consciousness”. It even starts with a quotation of several paragraphs from the *Communist Manifesto* written in 1847 by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, the foundation text of the Marxist movement. This long quotation seems to have been placed here purely for show. It seems to be asserting: “We are Communists and we support and uphold the movement that Marx and Engels started”.

In the Secretariat Report there is plenty of rhetoric along the following lines:

“38. The current ANC leadership led by President Ramaphosa and all of them previously failed to understand what does not need to be researched, it is a simple understanding which is understood by everybody that political power without economic power is an empty shell. Regardless of our political party logos, representing black African majority for the liberation struggle. We as revolutionary forces without pursuing an economic struggle where we must affirm into ownership and control the majority of the South African people, who are black and African, we must forget about total emancipation of our people. We must forget about the struggle for socialism. We must forget about winning the battle against crime, corruption, poverty, unemployment and inequalities as the continuing racist capitalist system in our country, as all over the world capitalism will continue to breed all these social ills. The future is socialism!”

For all the talk about “vanguarding ourselves” and “consciousness”, the Secretariat Report deliberately showcases the thoroughly discreditable attitude to party building of Chairman Mao. Here, the NUMSA leadership finds a tradition that they can accept and which buttresses their position. This Response to the NUMSA Secretariat Report has said quite a lot about Lenin and the Bolshevik Party, because the understanding of “consciousness” and “vanguard” which the leadership of NUMSA presents in the Secretariat Report is quite different

from that of Lenin and his comrades.

The current NUMSA leadership has no ammunition with which to attack the actual politics and struggle of the opposition, The Secretariat Report says not a word of real analysis about the abuses about which the opposition complain. It has nothing to say about the actual policies and tactics of building a working-class movement that were adopted at the 2013 Special Congress of NUMSA. The Secretariat Report can list the shortcomings of the South African government and the problems faced by the masses, but the only practical proposals put forward are to seek closer relations with the SACP and COSATU leaders and to pursue a purge of the opposition. With this in mind, the Report evokes the memory of Mao Tse-tung:

“Again, there is no better person than Commissar Mao Tse Tung who articulates the importance of organisational discipline, which is extremely important to a revolutionary, red union that is in the trenches for the struggle for socialism.”

Let us just spend a moment on the nonsense of a “red Union”. The idea of “red unions” was put forward by the Stalinists during the Third Period zig-zag to the ultra-left. Communists, acting hastily, have often enough courted both sacking by their bosses and disciplinary action and expulsion from established trade unions led by reformists, with the result that they could often become isolated from the main movement of their class. During the period from 1929 to 1933, in the expectation of immediate revolutionary struggles and the line of “class against class” Communist workers were encouraged by the Communist International to act extremely provocatively, initiate actions in isolation from the main membership of their unions and set up independent, communist-led minority trade unions. Experience taught serious Communists that this created a serious obstacle to them gaining the support of the majority of class-conscious workers.

It is astonishing enough that the Secretariat Report abuses

the opposition in NUMSA in the same breath as both “loony” left and “right-wingers”. It is impermissible that this Report itself revives the ultra-left nonsense of “red unions”.

But “Commissar” Mao (surely Chair of the Chinese Communist Party was title enough!) is evoked as an authority for a very specific reason. The Report quotes Mao as writing:

“This unity of democracy and centralism, of freedom and discipline, constitutes our democratic centralism. Under this system, the people enjoy extensive democracy and freedom, but at the same time they must keep within the bounds of socialist discipline.”

Now, a trade union is not a political party, still less a revolutionary political party. Its duty is to organise and support workers in their struggles. It should enrol and organise workers without reference to their political, religious or any other affiliations. This union – NUMSA – has decided that a revolutionary political party of the working class is needed, and that is a good decision and the Union already has a road-map towards achieving that goal, without strutting around presenting itself as if it already was that party.

The reason why the union leadership of NUMSA has picked on this quotation from Chairman Mao is, that it purports to give the union leadership powers to act arbitrarily as a handful of National Office Bearers see fit. Under the banner of Chairman Mao, dissidents can be expelled, awkward questions can be silenced and the leaders cannot be challenged. The description of “democratic centralism” quoted above ends with a chilling set of rules:

“We must affirm anew the discipline of the Party, namely:

- i. the individual is subordinate to the organisation
- ii. the minority is subordinate to the majority.
- iii. the lower level is subordinate to the higher level; and

- iv. the entire membership is subordinate to the Central Committee.
- v. Whoever violates these articles of discipline disrupts Party unity."

On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People,
1957

NUMSA did adopt a series of steps towards reviving the South African working-class movement and providing it with a political leadership. This itself arose in a process of discussion throughout the union. The policy was adopted by a majority of delegates at a Congress in December 2013. Some of us abroad were so enthusiastic about the policy that we travelled to South Africa to see if we could help and get involved. Some of us encouraged workers in struggle across southern Africa to approach NUMSA for comradeship and support. That, for us, represented an international duty. All of this went in vain. The leadership of NUMSA did not follow up on the policies adopted by the membership and has not put into effect the measures that members called for.

Members of trade unions have rights. They have the right to shape the policies of their union. They have the right to expect support from their union when they need it. They have the right to call their leadership to account when it does not carry out democratically-decided policies.

Members of political parties have rights, including members of revolutionary Leninist parties. They also have a duty, when their leaders make mistakes and even commit offences, to protest and insist that things are put right.

We in Workers International know this from bitter experience. Even organisations which were committed to a struggle for revolutionary Marxism have become dictatorial sects, exploiting and abusing individual members. Working out and defending a correct political line is half the battle: it

cannot be done without a permanent and devoted struggle to defend the methods and the health of the internal life of the organisation and its connection with the working class.

This is not liberalism. The class struggle requires selfless devotion on the part of conscious political activists – Communists. But these qualities are too easily exploited by proto-bureaucrats to undermine the self-confidence which is also an essential quality in a revolutionary, the determination to stand up on a question of principle.

No leadership can be exempted from the duty genuinely to account for its actions and the proposals which it places before its members and the working class.

Bob Archer

November 2022