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South Africa: After the expulsion of Numsa from Cosatu, acceleration of trade union and political recomposition

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On Friday, November 7, 2014, the metalworkers' union (340,000 members), NUMSA, was expelled from the national trade union federation, COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) by 33 votes to 24 on the national executive committee. This is a significant event. First, because this union is one of the most important in the federation. Then, because it was one of the essential components of its creation in 1980. However, it is obviously the reason for this expulsion which is vitally important. NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) was expelled for having, in December 2013, decided at its congress to no longer support the ANC and the Communist Party in power and having denounced their neoliberal policies and corruption.

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A historical cycle has closed. Because at the very beginning of the 1980s, while the mass movement was reconstructed and struggles against the white regime took on a great breadth, two currents of thought disputed for hegemony. On one side the African National Congress (ANC) and its pilot fish, the CP, on the other the trade union leadership born from the growth of a classic industrial proletariat (metals, chemicals, textiles). The first essentially defending a line of national democratic revolution, the latter a line of democratic and socialist revolution. If the activists of the ANC and the CP operated clandestinely within the mass movement, the latter enjoyed a relative legality as trade union leaders.

The tension was extreme during the first part of the decade. While some of these trade unions, grouped at the time within the federation FOSATU (Federation of South African Trade Unions) were trying (in vain) to win hegemony in the townships, the CP complained in its press of "leftists", "armchair revolutionaries", "Trotskyists" and so on. But the objective pressure for trade union unification between those who openly supported the line of the ANC (beginning with the miners' union, the NUM) and those that still posed the question of a Workers' Party and an independent labour movement eventually led to the formation of a single large national federation, COSATU, in December 1985.

Thirty years of rotting

In the beginning, everybody was supposed to retain their right of expression and there was some

tension during the early years between the two “wings” of the movement. Then came the time of the negotiations between the ANC, the liberal bourgeoisie, the West and then with the regime itself, at the time of glasnost and pressure from Gorbachev. Sometimes through naivety, often through opportunism, a large part of the “independent” trade union leadership was converted. Many of their leaders later joined the CP and the ANC, in the name of new times, of the hegemony finally won by the ANC, realism, the sudden democratization of Stalinism and many other reasons mentioned. After the historic elections of 1994, they became ministers, businessmen, chairs of all sorts of bodies with a very high remuneration. Unions such as NUMSA were totally led by members of the CP, supporting without too much trouble the decisions taken in the name of the “first stage” (nonetheless very neoliberal) of the march to “socialism”. Union dues were used in part to finance the CP, “natural” spokesperson of the proletariat! Within COSATU as a whole, direct bribery took a hold, turning for example Cyril Ramaphosa, the former leader of the miners’ union, into a millionaire and a shareholder in the mines although number two in the ANC.

But time passed: rank and file demands, worsening poverty, broken promises, employers’ firmness, the emergence of a new generation in the elected bodies. And then, the last major event, the massacre of 34 striking miners at Marikana on August 16, 2012. The NUMSA congress of December 2013 took note of all this and proclaimed its political break with the government and the CP. No more contributions, no more calls to vote for the ANC and an appeal to other unions to adopt this same line. All covered by a reference to a united front for socialism and the objective of an independent workers’ party.

What is both damning and stimulating is that we are now witnessing, almost, the same debate as in 1983/85. Thirty years after, the successors of the protagonists of that time are in the same conflict in virtually the same terms. Thirty years lost? Of course not. Because at the time there was a political battle within the struggles, whereas today one of the two camps is in power, uses the violence of the state, expresses the point of view of a deeply corrupt bureaucracy, and colludes with big white capital (which was predictable three decades ago).

For NUMSA, the equation is complex. It cannot simply make reference, as today and in a fantasized manner, to what it believes to be the correct positions of the ANC and CP before the degeneration. It must make this balance sheet and understand that the concepts, for example on the national question (“colonialism of a specific type”), hid since the origin the local adaptation of the Soviet line of the national and democratic revolution involving the class alliances and systemic compromise that we have seen for 20 years. It can no longer think, as the CP claimed and still claims, that the working class is “unique” and its political representation necessarily passes through a single “workers” party. Things are infinitely more complicated in this vast country of multiple social diversities. Finally, a retroactive analysis of the process of bureaucratization is needed if NUMSA wants to turn the page.

What trade union and political recomposition?

The process of organizational clarification is, therefore, only in its infancy. The priority for NUMSA should be first on the trade union front. It is excluded from the COSATU but eight other trade unions inside COSATU have established links with it. The joint meeting which was held with these unions, on November 9, 2014, in the aftermath of the expulsion, went well and bodes well for a joint collaboration between NUMSA and these unions which are still (temporarily?) COSATU members. A common meeting seems to be emerging for the next few weeks.

In addition, other unions already exist outside of COSATU, like the AMCU (Association of

Mineworkers and Construction Union, formed in 1998), located in the platinum mines, as well as the ongoing divisions within COSATU unions, for example in education. A national movement of the rural poor has just been set up. The burning question is therefore that of an alternative trade union grouping, but also its form, its objectives and its internal democracy. For the rest, on socialism and the “workers’ party”, the confusion within NUMSA’s leadership remains very high, between the concept of a united front of anti-capitalist forces and the simple self-proclamation of its own proletarian leadership.

However, there cannot be an escalation of intense social struggles without political forces emerging in parallel. First of all there is the case of the current from the ANC youth, the Economic Freedom Fighters, linked to Julius Malema, who with 6.35% of the votes in the general elections of May 2014 (or 1,169,259 votes), account now for 25 seats in the national assembly and are the biggest opposition force in several provinces. The EFF is itself in the midst of a programmatic debate as regards its profession of socialist faith.

Other political forces exist, very active in the trade unions and social movements, and in discussion with NUMSA and the EFF. The map of militant forces and the socialist project has therefore every chance of being different in a few years if not a few months. Without forgetting that there will be government repression in a country where everyday social violence leaves large margins of manoeuvre to the violence of the state itself.

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* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>