

Peter Manson reports on the expulsion of Cosatu's biggest affiliate



Numsa members: enough is enough

Cape Town has just played host to the “largest global gathering of trade unions ever to take place in Africa”, in the shape of the December 7-10 world congress of the Swiss-based UNI Global Union. Originally called Union Network International, UNI groups together 900 service-sector unions worldwide - including the Communication Workers Union and Connect in Britain - with a total membership of 20 million.

Hosting this gathering of 2,000 delegates was seen as a bit of a coup for both the African National Congress government and the main trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions. However, two embarrassing factors have removed a good deal of the gloss. The first is the rolling power cuts - “load shedding”, as they are called - whereby every day the state-owned electricity supplier, Eskom, desperately tries to get round its disastrous lack of capacity and failure to maintain the grid by pulling out the plugs for a couple of hours. These rotating cuts, currently taking place at the height of the South African summer, are due to go on until 2016 at the very earliest. Inevitably, it will be the working class and poor, with no access to private generators, who will be worse affected.

The second embarrassment takes the form of the split in Cosatu driven by the South African Communist Party. In the early hours of November 8, a special meeting of Cosatu's central executive committee (CEC) voted by 33 votes to 24 to expel its largest affiliate, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa). Led by Cosatu president Sidumo Dlamini and National Union of Mineworkers general secretary Frans Baleni, the SACP loyalists insisted that the 350,000-strong Numsa must be booted out

because of its desertion of the ANC and rejection of the ANC-SACP-Cosatu triple alliance.

The leaders of every Cosatu union are (or were) SACP members - and that applies to Numsa and its general secretary, Irvin Jim. But, after two decades of cuts, privatisation and attacks on the working class, a good number of them, with the Numsa leadership in the fore, have finally realised that the SACP narrative - of an ANC-led “national democratic revolution” (NDR) that is the “most direct route to socialism” in South Africa - is nothing but a pathetic sham.

A year ago, Numsa voted unanimously to withdraw all support from the ANC and, in a direct challenge to SACP policy, sponsor a specifically working class “United Front” and a “Movement for Socialism”, with the aim of establishing a workers’ party in opposition to the ANC. For the SACP leadership, this was a combination of sacrilege and treason. In the words of Numsa spokesperson Castro Ngobese, for the Communist Party

The way forward is only through the ANC. It does not matter whether the movement is limping or it implements neoliberal policies that hurt workers and the poor. Everything must be through the ANC. It is the ANC and nothing else. By endorsing the expulsion of Numsa from Cosatu, the SACP confirms what many of us have painfully learnt: that if you do not agree with the strategic approach of the Communist Party you are an enemy that must be dealt with and defeated. *

The reason for this is the key role of the SACP within the ANC and particularly within parliament, including government itself. Since the first post-apartheid administration in 1994, there have been numerous SACP ministers - some of them holding key posts. Today both general secretary Blade Nzimande and his deputy, Jeremy Cronin, are part of Jacob Zuma’s government team, along with a raft of others. They include Rob Davies, who as trade and industry minister plays a highly significant role in promoting South African capitalism.

And some of these ministers are former trade unionists. For example, the mineworkers’ previous president, Senzeni Zokwana, was elected as an ANC MP in this year’s general election and is now agriculture minister, as well as being national chair of the SACP. The party’s deputy chair, Thulas Nxesi, was once general secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers Union and is now public works minister.

As socialist journalist Terry Bell explains,

Since parliament is obviously ... a “key site of power and influence”, it is not surprising ... that the SACP is disproportionately represented among ANC MPs. This, according to Numsa general secretary Irvin Jim, is the party’s reward from the ANC for “delivering” Cosatu to the governing alliance. A loss of influence, let alone control, over Cosatu would almost certainly mean a severe loss of influence with the ANC, certainly in terms of parliamentary positions. *

He could also have mentioned the loss of fat ministerial salaries.

Charges

So on what grounds was Numsa expelled? There were five charges:

- Numsa had called on Cosatu to withdraw all support for the ANC - a serious disciplinary matter, obviously. When similar positions had previously been made by other, smaller unions, however, no action was taken - no-one even considered calling for these unions to be brought to book.
- Numsa had organised a march of its members to Cosatu House in February 2014, to protest against the suspension of the federation's general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, and the refusal of the CEC to call a special national congress to discuss this and the federation's general orientation (see below). The proposed march did not actually take place, but even *considering* a protest was deemed to be a disciplinary matter.
- Numsa had taken a decision to withhold its affiliation fees until the Cosatu leadership fulfilled its constitutional obligation to convene the special national congress, as demanded by a third of its affiliates. Once again, this decision was not actually implemented, but the charge stood nevertheless.
- Numsa had stopped contributing to Cosatu's SACP levy - even though support for the SACP is not a requirement of affiliation.
- Numsa had agreed to "extend its scope of operation" beyond the metal industry - in other words, it stood accused of wanting to poach members from other Cosatu unions.

Clearly it is only the final charge that has any real weight. Which is why the SACP began to stress it more and more, claiming that Numsa was disrupting fraternal relations by ignoring the principle of 'One industry, one union'. But even this charge reeks of hypocrisy, for Numsa was actually behaving exactly as all other affiliates always have. Every single one of them has extended its "scope of operation" beyond the area indicated by its name. For example, the SACP-loyal National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) organises nurses, even though the Democratic Nurses Organisation of SA (Denosa) is also a Cosatu affiliate.

What really stuck in the gullet of pro-alliance leaders like Baleni of the NUM is the fact that, as a result of the failure by his union to organise effectively to defend its members in and around the miners' battles that culminated in the Marikana massacre of 2012, thousands defected to other unions - not least Numsa. That is one of the reasons why Numsa overtook the NUM as South Africa's largest union.

However, this so-called ‘poaching’ has to be viewed in context. Firstly, while Cosatu is the largest union federation, it is not the only one. Following the expulsion of Numsa, it now has 1.9 million members, while a further two federations have around 900,000 in total and a good number of other unions are unattached. However, unionised workers account for less than 30% of the total, so there is generally no problem with unions branching out into new recruitment areas.

Just as significant is the fact that the number of unionised workers is considerably smaller than the number of unemployed. Official jobless figures stand at 5.2 million - no less than 25% of those available for work. But the *real* unemployment rate, if you include those who have given up looking for a properly recognised job, is a massive 35.8% of the adult population.

Aftermath

At the lengthy Cosatu hearing which ended in the expulsion vote, Irvin Jim went on the counterattack: “Our first charge is that you have violated the constitution,” he told the Cosatu leadership at the special CEC meeting in Johannesburg. “You have refused to hold a special national congress.”

Normal congresses are held only once every three years and the next is due in September 2015. But, when general secretary Vavi was suspended 18 months ago for having an affair with a Cosatu office worker, Numsa and other oppositionists rightly suspected that the real reason was Vavi’s increasingly strident criticisms of the ANC. Nine unions out of the then 19 affiliates demanded a special congress and, even though the constitution stipulates that such a congress must be called if it is requested by a third of affiliates, the leadership simply refused to comply with this (it now says it will call a special congress in July 2015 - just two months before the next triennial congress is due and a full 18 months after it received the request from the nine unions). Eventually Numsa challenged Vavi’s suspension through the courts and the CEC was obliged to take him back.

At the special CEC meeting, Jim alleged:

You want to expel us because we constantly remind you how you are failing to protect the interests of the working class ... We will not give you any peace, as we expose the miserable failure of the class alliance you are entangled in and how it compromises your ability to lead the working class.

And, following the inevitable result, Numsa put out a statement, which claimed:

Numsa’s biggest crime has been to democratically, in its own congress, argue for the political independence of the federation, given the worsening material conditions of the working class as a result of neoliberal ANC policies. Both at Marikana and in the farmworkers strike in the Western Cape, the armed forces of the state intervened in support of the owners of capital against striking workers. In both instances the result

was the murder of workers, whose only crime was to refuse to sell their labour for less than a living wage.³

But Numsa is not isolated. Seven of the remaining 19 Cosatu unions, representing 600,000 members, issued a statement entitled 'Defend Cosatu, defend Numsa', in which they referred to a "sad and shameful week".

They continued:

[The leadership has] frantically turned away from the radical, worker-biased policies endorsed by successive Cosatu congresses that made it a powerful defender of the working class. Instead, it has turned towards blatant neoliberalism, as enshrined in the national development plan (NDP) and other government policies. So insecure and oversensitive are the political leaders of the SACP that any challenge to the orthodoxy they defend is considered dangerous, counterrevolutionary and, in the words of a Nehawu leader, must be "surgically removed".⁴

In reality, the "radical, worker-biased policies", previously endorsed by just about every Cosatu union, were just rhetoric - rhetoric that the SACP-loyal leadership is still quite capable of putting out today. The truth is, the SACP has hardly issued a murmur whenever the ANC has attacked the working class, and that applies to its members on the Cosatu leadership too. But the seven are right about the SACP's intolerance of any opposition.

And it is clear that it was the Communist Party, not the ANC, that wanted Numsa out. True, Jim blamed ANC secretary general Gwede Mantashe for "pulling the trigger" - "Mantashe can look for the nearest cliff and jump," he said. But Mantashe is a member of the SACP political bureau. His deputy in the ANC, Jessie Duarte, a non-SACP member, took a rather different view:

Perhaps the question we should, today, confront is whether or not Numsa - notwithstanding Cosatu's constitutional principle of 'One industry, one union' - could remain in Cosatu and pursue its outlook. We believe that it could, even if it continued to pursue its intended goal of a United Front.⁵

Duarte referred to the ANC 'task team' under Cyril Ramaphosa, which negotiated a truce within Cosatu lasting several months. But in the end the ANC was unable to hold back the SACP loyalists in Cosatu. Of 'One industry, one union', she says that, rather than taking disciplinary action against Numsa, "the ANC task team recommended that the federation consider creating an arbitration commission that would make determination on these kinds of issues, given the complex environment of labour and the changing situation of trade unions themselves".

According to Ian Ollis, labour spokesman of the opposition Democratic Alliance, a "weakened federation" after the expulsion of Numsa may give the government "the opportunity to relax labour legislation, as they will no longer be held hostage by Cosatu".

Leaving aside the blatant, although not unsurprising, anti-union sentiment expressed by a leader of this direct descendant of the apartheid National Party, Ollis has totally misunderstood the role of Cosatu under SACP control. Yes, it has defended “labour legislation”, and often acted as a safety valve, allowing workers to let off steam, but overall it has served to *dilute* union opposition to the ANC’s neoliberal policies. No wonder the ANC urged Cosatu to reconsider its decision to expel Numsa - it knows only too well that a divided union movement cannot be so easily controlled.

Loyalist reaction

An official Cosatu statement, issued on November 11, claimed: “One thing is certain: the federation will emerge from the current challenges even stronger, without sacrificing an inch of our policies and principles.” Talk about official optimism!

Equally pathetic was the reaction of the loyalist affiliates. For instance, Sadtu, the teachers union, declared:

For months the federation has been bullied by Numsa with multiple threats of splits and the formation of a so-called workers’ party, going against previous resolutions and policies. In our view, the relationship between Numsa and the federation can be characterised as an abusive marriage, in which a partner stays for the sake of material benefits.⁶

Just as insubstantial and absurd was the claim of the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union: “We are resolute that the decision to rid the federation of Numsa is a building block to a Cosatu that speaks with one voice when a decision is taken, for the benefit of all workers in the country and abroad.”⁷

For its part, the SACP itself managed to feign discomfort: “The SACP political bureau regrets that Cosatu’s CEC was left with no option but to take the drastic and unpleasant step of expelling Numsa from its ranks.” After all, Numsa had been “throwing reckless insults in all directions”. So, far from the decision being “a case of an externally manipulated witch-hunt” (as no doubt many readers of this article will conclude), it was “a case of self-expulsion”. That’s right: Cosatu had “no option” but to expel a union that seeks, in its own flawed way, to actually advance the interests of workers rather than those of the capitalist state.

Laughably, the politburo statement claimed: “The SACP remains committed to the struggle for working class unity, including a respect for a diversity of views amongst the organised working class and the popular masses.” And it issued an appeal to “the great majority of Numsa rank-and-file members - quite a number of whom are our own SACP members - not to follow the divisive path of their leadership”.

By “divisive”, it was not, of course, referring to the SACP’s own actions in further splitting the union movement, but to Numsa’s call on Cosatu to break with the ANC popular front. Why should anyone want to do that? You see,

Whatever the weaknesses in the ANC-led government - and we are not in denial about them - over the past 20 years our democratic government has led a major and progressive fiscal redistributive programme. As even the recent World Bank study of middle-income developing countries has conceded, South Africa’s fiscal redistributive programme has, in its impact, surpassed the achievements of our peer group, including Brazil.⁸

Clearly, South Africa’s “national democratic revolution” is making great progress. I have already pointed to the millions of unemployed, but a large proportion of these poverty-stricken people live in what are known as “informal settlements” - ie, shacks. Two years ago the number of shacks was estimated to be 1.1 million (over 9% of households, probably some five million people), according to research published by the Housing Development Agency. It is generally agreed that the number of shacks has only marginally decreased since 1994.⁹

Meanwhile, the Gini coefficient, which measures social inequality, has risen from 6.4% to 6.9% over the last 10 years, making South Africa officially the most unequal country in the world. Yes, the NDR is taking tremendous strides towards socialism.

In an online article, SACP number two, Jeremy Cronin, quoted this Numsa statement:

We have boldly maintained that at the heart of the crisis in Cosatu are two opposing forces: the forces of capitalism and the forces of socialism. The capitalist forces within the federation seek to make workers understand and tolerate the continuation of white monopoly capitalist domination, by accepting elements of the neoliberal NDP. The socialist forces seek to mobilise the working class to break the power of white monopoly capitalism through the implementation of the Freedom Charter, as historically understood by the working class.¹⁰

Once again, the illusions in a failed strategy are apparent (what kind of “socialism”?), but, for all that, this is a call to end an alliance between mutually antagonistic class forces in order to pursue a strategy of working class independence. However, Cronin’s response is: “This is a declaration of civil war within the federation, not a constructive, if critical, engagement.”¹¹

And the party’s number-one internet hack, Dominic Tweedie, was true to form, when it came to hyperbole:

Numsa refused to stop poaching members from other affiliates. The only reason that Numsa could claim to be “Cosatu’s biggest affiliate” was because it was eating other unions. Numsa was a cannibal union. It threatened Cosatu’s existence. Numsa wants all the prizes and it wants to kick out all rivals and replace them.¹²

But first prize for inanity surely goes to a group of “concerned members within Numsa”, who have chosen to “expose role-players involved in an underground plot to destabilise South Africa as part of efforts by rogue elements within the Numsa’s leadership to effect regime change in South Africa”.

These ‘ordinary, rank-and-file members’ inform us on their web page that the aim of these “rogue elements” is to “instigate widespread violence and instability within South African communities”. Apparently, Irvin Jim and co have been “establishing their own intelligence structures (in collaboration with foreign governments and international companies) to facilitate their regime change agenda”.

Split and split again

Since Vavi was reinstated as general secretary earlier this year by order of a Johannesburg court, he has tried to play the role of conciliator, urging both sides to allow the ANC task team to find a solution. So, when ANC peace moves were effectively rejected by the loyalists, Vavi declined to front the Cosatu press conference announcing the expulsion. According to president Dlamini, Vavi would not be there because he was “consulting his lawyers” - either that, or he had gone to sign “court papers”.

But since then Vavi has made his views clear. He wrote in an open letter: “I plead with you to understand that I will not be able to defend a decision that I honestly believe is contradicting and undermining organised workers and broader working class unity ...”

And, addressing the UNI world congress on December 9, he came out strongly against the leadership majority. Explaining the Cosatu fault lines, he stated: “The divisions broadly fall into a camp which is in favour of the vigorous implementation of the decisions of the 2012 Cosatu 11th national congress and a *leadership camp* that, without seeking a new mandate, appears to have drifted from a commitment to implementing these resolutions” (my emphasis). He described those divisions as “not just a setback, but an act of treason against workers’ interests”. You can see why the bloodletting within Cosatu is far from over - the federation’s main spokesperson is giving voice to a diametrically opposite position to that of its president and the CEC majority.

In addition, the same fault lines are being replicated in every affiliated union. As I have pointed out, seven Cosatu unions have already been won to support Numsa, but in those still controlled by the loyalists everything is up in the air. According to *Business Day*,

Rumours are rife of splits in the other big public-sector union, the South African Democratic Teachers Union, whose Eastern Cape chapter is likely to face censure from the national leadership for proceeding with court action against it. There is talk of strife in the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union, with members in prisons likely to split off. The South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) is split over corruption allegations against its leaders.

And the loyalists have not been slow to follow through the logic of their union-splitting moves by establishing a SACP-loyal rival to Numsa in the shape of the Liberated Metalworkers Union of South Africa (Limusa).⁴⁵ Limusa is the brainchild of Cedric Gina, the former president of Numsa who suddenly quit the union, sending his resignation letter not to the leadership, but by email to all Numsa branches. In it, he said he was leaving before his differences with Irvin Jim “became violent”. This followed last year’s decision to withdraw support from the ANC and SACP.

On the other side of the battle lines, we have the newly formed South African Public Service Union (Sapsu). Behind this move is Thobile Ntola, the recently dismissed president of the loyalist teachers’ union, Sadtu. He was given the boot for coming out in support of Vavi, along with Irvin Jim of Numsa. But I am reliably informed that Jim did not give his blessing to the formation of Sapsu - he is, after all, defending himself against charges of poaching. While Ntola talks of the need for one big public-service union, to be based on ‘One industry, one union’, the reality is that his new organisation has been set up in direct opposition to the existing (loyalist-controlled) public-sector unions.

Meanwhile Numsa is preparing for the December 13 national launch of the United Front for Workers and Communities, which has already seen provincial launch meetings. The March 2015 meeting of Numsa’s central committee is due to “consolidate our work on the Movement for Socialism” - a step towards the formation of a new political party, which would possibly contest the 2016 municipal elections.

However, not all on the Numsa side would support such a move. For example, Dale McKinley, a leading member of the Anti-Privatisation Forum who was expelled from the SACP in 2000, writes:

It would be a politically strategic mistake for Numsa and its existing ‘Front’ allies to interpret the union’s expulsion as a green light to move rapidly towards the establishment of a socialist political party to contest elections. Doing so would undermine the very basis for political unity amongst still ideologically and tactically disparate forces.⁴⁶

Instead, says comrade McKinley, what is needed is “the patient but systematic building of a new political movement through unity in active struggle”. To me that sounds like a recipe for doing nothing in the guise of activism.

South Africa, like every other country on the planet, needs a single Marxist party. It is true that the likes of Irvin Jim have no understanding of what such a formation ought to look like, but the Movement for Socialism could provide a site for the struggle to win such a party. However, I am not advocating that any remaining Marxists in the SACP should abandon it. A parallel fight for working class independence must be waged there too.

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Notes

1. www.iol.co.za/sundayindependent/sacp-s-divisive-role-in-the-fracas-1.1780970#.Vick2jGsUuU.
2. <http://terrybellwrites.com/2014/11/30/who-stands-to-lose-most-in-sa-union-fracas>.
3. Numsa statement, November 9.
4. Statement from seven unions, November 10.
5. www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71654?oid=806843&sn=Detail&pid=71654.
6. Sadtu statement, November 14
7. Popcru statement, November 14.
8. SACP statement, November 10.
9. www.thehda.co.za/uploads/images/HDA_Informal_settlements_status_South_Africa.pdf.
10. www.numsa.org.za/article/the-rightward-drift-in-the-national-liberation-movement-2013-09-25.
11. *Umsebenzi Online* November 14.
12. *The New Age* November 14.
13. <http://cdn.mg.co.za/content/documents/2014/12/01/numsaexposed.pdf>.
14. www.bdlive.co.za/opinion/columnists/2014/12/05/labour-scene-in-state-of-flux-after-numsa-expulsion.
15. As readers may gather, it is traditional in South Africa for the names of working class organisations to take the form of an acronym.
16. <http://saesis.org.za/site/article/2193>.