Special Issue on Labor and the Left in South Africa

Introduction

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The theme of labor and the left has become politically and intellectually marginalized in post-apartheid South Africa. At one level this reflects international developments. The dramatic and final destruction of the residual legitimacy of the Soviet model and the dead-end of social democratic politics have contributed to the virtual hegemony of the neo-liberal economic and social agenda. Alongside these political shifts, the popularity of post-modernist intellectual approaches has led to the widespread rejection of universal models and "grand narratives" as explanations of political and social developments. In part, the new intellectual agendas influenced by post-modernism are a corrective to the overly simplistic structural approaches of the 1960s and 1970s, to a labor historiography which has given primacy to the experiences of white male workers and to naive and optimistic teleologies. This combination of political and ideological shifts poses a significant challenge to intellectual studies of labor and the left.

But the marginalization of these fields in South Africa also reflects local and distinctively South African dynamics. Firstly, it complements the pursuit by the African National Congress (ANC) of a neo-liberal agenda which prioritizes the needs of capital over those of workers and unemployed people, signified in its adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR) in June 1996. Secondly, the creation of an authorized history of national liberation and the founding of a new order licenses a particular characterization of the history of labor.

The late 1970s and 1980s were undoubtedly critical years in determining the balance of forces and the political alliances which led to the particular negotiated solution in South Africa. The possibility that an independent left-labor alliance might assume leadership of the national liberation struggle and promote an agenda for significant social transformation was always unlikely. Nonetheless, the balance of forces between organized labor and the exiled ANC in these years, coupled with the diffusion first of black consciousness and then of socialist ideas amongst political and trade union activists, gave credibility to that possibility. While the ANC had become relatively marginalized inside South Africa, the dynamic, independent and non-racial labor movement gained significant legislative concessions from the state. These were years of intellectual ferment and of passionate discussions about socialism.

But by the late 1980s the balance of forces between organized labor — and notably the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) — and the ANC had shifted. The changing relationship was manifested in struggles over the adoption of the Freedom Charter and over organizational alignment with the ANC as opposed to either alliance with other groups within the liberation movement or to non-alignment. The crystallization of the Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, COSATU and the South African Communist Party (SACP), together with the decision, in 1990, of leading COSATU trade unionists to join the SACP, cemented this shift.

This political shift within the liberation movement has been reflected in the intellectual community. Left-wing economists moved towards neo-liberalism, while the 1994 Wits History Workshop was notable for the dearth of papers on history — and particularly on divergent political traditions — as opposed to policy; eyes were on the winners. The *Mail & Guardian*, a leading organ for progressive dissent during the liberation struggle, today publishes very few articles on labor, while the profiles of trade unionists presented in the pages of the *South African Labour Bulletin* present a vision of the forward march of labor — ex-strugglers now reaping the benefits of their sacrifices. A recent edition of the SACP's *African Communist* (no.150, 1998) consists of coded diatribes against internal Party dissidents, with a striking lack of reference to developments in the wider society which might be of relevance to socialists.

Nonetheless, the articles in this special issue indicate that there is a continuing interest in labor studies and left studies. The historiographical and political issues addressed range from the recovery of hidden history to the reassess-

ment of key historical episodes to the analysis of political tensions in the post-apartheid era.

Most historical writing about the South African socialist movement has been by South African Communists or former Communists. This historiography depicts the early years of South African socialism as a brief period of socialist experimentation in which the International Socialist League, a radical offshoot of the white South African Labour Party, took the initiative in forming a centralized socialist body — the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) — which affiliated to the Communist International (Comintern) in 1921. The transition leading to the CPSA's formation is typically seen as unproblematic. Lucien van der Walt's article on the International Socialist League challenges this teleological approach which downplays the diversity of the early socialist movement. The International Socialist League represented a distinctive strand in South African socialism, he argues - a libertarian socialist strand associated with the revolutionary syndicalist tradition. In its interest to organize all workers — represented in its founding of the black Industrial Workers of Africa — it broke with the racism of the South African Labour Party. But this tradition became submerged when the newly-formed CPSA affiliated to the Comintern, which was critical of syndicalist approaches.

Within six months of its founding the CPSA was faced with a major challenge. This was the outbreak of a strike by white men on the coal and gold mines of the Witwatersrand that led to the notorious 1922 Rand Revolt — a watershed in South African labor history. The brutality with which Prime Minister Jan Smuts crushed the protest led to the collapse of the white trade union movement and to an electoral realignment. Two years later, in 1924, Smuts' South African Party lost power and an alliance of the South African Labour Party and the National Party took office. The Pact Government, as it became known, launched a policy of white labor protectionism, facilitating the incorporation of white labor interests into the state.

Peter Alexander's article addresses a little-studied aspect of the 1922 Rand Revolt: the protests of white coal miners that, in turn, helped to trigger strikes on the gold mines. Alexander returns to a debate of the 1970s on the class nature and consciousness of white labor in South Africa. Influenced by E.P. Thompson's use of "class experience" as a link between structure and consciousness, Alexander is concerned with how different categories of white men working on the mines saw themselves and how they aspired to be seen. He examines the discourses of whites in the collieries as a means to illuminate class position and consciousness. The disjuncture in how white miners saw themselves and how they were viewed by white staff along with the miners' unsuccessful attempt to be re-categorized within the official hierarchy contributed, in Alexander's view, to the vehemence of their strike.

The document entitled *Minutes of a Meeting of Communist Delegates at Albert Street Hall, on November 13, 1932*, is from the Comintern Archives at the *Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii* (RTsKhIDNI) [Russian Center for the Conservation and Study of Modern History Records] in Moscow.[1] The opening of these archives to foreign researchers at the end of the Cold War has made accessible a massive amount of new empirical material. This poses methodological challenges regarding the type of questions that we can ask of these documents and the answers that they allow. Most of the South African material is in English, the main language used by the CPSA in its publications and correspondence.

This document records the proceedings of a meeting by a number of Communist Party dissidents during the New Line period. The New Line policy which the Comintern imposed on its local affiliates from 1928 created great tensions in national Communist Parties, including the CPSA. The New Line led to sudden policy oscillations and to the expulsion of the first generation of Communist Party leaders — often veteran socialists. In the meeting that the document records, disaffected Communists are considering the problem of how to respond to the erosion of democracy and the centralization of power within the Party. This document offers insights into dynamics within the CPSA — including the relationships between black and white members — as well as the relationship between the local affiliate and the Comintern.

Parallel to the opening of the Comintern Archives with the demise of the Cold War, the ending of apartheid has meant that much documentary material previously kept in private collections or stored outside the country for security reasons has been relocated to archives in South African universities. The Mayibuye Archive at the University of the Western Cape is notable as a rich source of documentary material. Vladimir Shubin's research in this archive has enabled him to challenge a number of previously held assumptions and views about the history of the liberation movement, some of which reflect the distorting lenses of the Cold War era. Shubin raises substantive historical questions about the ANC's turn to armed struggle, its experience of exile and about the relationships between the ANC and the SACP and between these South African organizations and Soviet authorities. He discredits both the view that the ANC was a Communist puppet and that the SACP was a Soviet puppet, suggesting a much more complex and nuanced picture of the relationship between these two organizations and Soviet officials.

A critical contemporary question is how to explain the ANC's rightwards trajectory in the 1990s and the increasingly ambiguous relationship between the ANC and organized labor. Phil Eidelberg argues that the ANC's seeming rapprochement with organized labor in the 1980s was in fact a rapprochement with an emergent urban African middle class. The development of this class, he contends, has to be understood in terms of the internal decline of apartheid — a system that generated its own contradictions. The reforms of urban apartheid in the 1970s facilitated the growth of an urban African middle class which challenged the hegemony of the bantustans — the cornerstone of apartheid policy — and which became politically dominant in community organizations such as civics. The ANC's change from a policy of external and rural-based guerrilla penetration to one of urban insurrection or people's war gave it

greater credibility with the radical middle class-led civics, reinforcing its community rather than trade union base. Eidelberg contends that this middle class influence led to a reinterpretation of the Freedom Charter. Originally premised on a class alliance of the black middle and working classes and implying a substantial restructuring of the South African economy through nationalization, the Charter came to be understood in a manner allowing South Africa's reintegration into the international capitalist economy. Middle class leadership of the liberation movement, he maintains, emerged at the expense of organized labor and the unorganized poor.

Andrew Nash covers the same period through a consideration of Western Marxism in South Africa. This strand of Marxism became influential amongst white university-based intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s — when the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 led to the smothering of black political opposition, giving greater significance to white radical politics. A challenge to both orthodox Communist and Trotskyist thinking, its main philosophical exponent, Richard Turner, promoted a conception of socialism premised on the idea of the ethical individual and moral choice. Its leading figures played a critical role in the building of many popular organizations, but notably in the organization of the non-racial trade union movement. Yet by the early 1990s most of its leading exponents had joined the SACP, which accommodated itself with the ANC's move to the right and its accommodation with capital. In Nash's view the limitations of Western Marxism lay in its inability to develop its capacity for critical reflection, with consequent practical implications. The demise of Western Marxism in South Africa was linked to its failures in the West. The Western left's need to find a clear organizational focus for its support of the anti-apartheid struggle, Nash argues, eroded its capacity to critically assess and to look beyond the ANC and SACP.

Lungisile Ntsebeza points to tensions that have emerged in the post-apartheid as a result of the ANC's aim to be a broad church and to incorporate diverse class and political interests. This led the ANC to make political concessions to traditional authorities in order to obtain their support. This poses significant problems in rural South Africa for the implementation of a democracy based on the principles of elected representation and of gender equality. Ntsebeza draws on Mahmood Mamdani's thesis about the necessity of dismantling the fused character of tribal authorities in order to promote democratization in Africa.[2] Yet, Ntsebeza cautions, separation of powers must be coupled with the principle of elected representation. Thus far, he concludes, people in the rural areas of the former bantustans have not yet achieved political democracy.

Many people ask cynically what is new about the new South Africa. It is a society of massive contradictions; it is also a society in flux. The extreme economic disparities between rich and poor persist and broadly follow color lines. Yet, there is a growing, although arguably tenuous, African middle class, a developing African bourgeoisie and an increase in the number of poor whites. The position of women is anomalous. It is estimated that half of all South African women will be victims of rape, and HIV infection has increased 30-fold since 1990, spreading fastest among young women. Yet, since 1994 women have made striking gains in their constitutional rights and their parliamentary representation. Socially, the old sectional barriers are breaking down in individual cases. On the other hand, the black consciousness ethos which posited unity of all people of color against the apartheid regime has broken down. Even politically engaged people now use the terms "Africans," "Coloureds," and "Indians." Yet black professionals are often derided as "affirmative action appointments" by their white counterparts. At the same time, there are vibrant and at times furious debates in the press about who is an African and the meaning of African identity. The parameters of politics have fundamentally altered since the end of apartheid.

The recent South Africa elections saw 16 parties contesting at the national level and 10 at the provincial level. Thirteen parties won enough votes to gain seats in Parliament; with the exception of the Azanian People's Organisation, which has one Member of Parliament, all of these were to the right of the ANC on issues related to working class rights. Despite South Africa's long tradition of socialist activity, left wing perspectives today have little, if any, impact on electoral activity. Post-apartheid South Africa has a "fractured" political spectrum.[3]

Although voting patterns still largely follow racial or sectional lines, the 1999 electoral results indicate that there is still some limited scope for fluidity, as indicated by the virtual demise of the National Party. Opinion polls suggest that a growing proportion of voters of all colors see themselves as politically independent rather than tied to a single party.[4] It is likely that ANC support will erode at the margins due to dissatisfaction with its problems of delivery and its increasing centralization. Yet prospects for any left-wing electoral movement have, seemingly, been blocked by the SACP's decision to continue its alliance with the ANC, coupled with the marginalization of alternative socialist groups and their refusal to pursue such an alliance. Some trade unionists such as Leonard Gentle, in his interview, argue that the SACP plays a critical mediating role between COSATU and an increasingly conservative ANC and suggest that the formation of an independent workers' or labor party might offer a way to ensure continued social transformation. Such a possibility would require years of arduous campaigning on the shop floor and in local communities. But the loss of an independent left tradition at a moment when politics has shifted to the electoral domain would have serious implications for the workings of democracy in post-apartheid South Africa.

Notes

[1] For background on the Comintern Archives see Mikhail Narinsky and Jurgen Rojahn (eds.), *Center and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam: International Institute of Social History, 1996).

[2] Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (London: James Currey, Cape Town: David Philip and Kampala: Fountain, 1996).

[3] See Robert Dahl, *After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society*, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 98-99 for a discussion of this concept in the American context.

[4] Adam Habib and Rupert Taylor, "Parliamentary Opposition and Democratic Consolidation in South Africa," *Review of African Political Economy,* 79 (1999): 109-115.