

Interview with Leonard Gentle, Manchester,

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Leonard Gentle's involvement in the South African trade union movement began in the 1980s, when he taught at the Alexander Sinton High School in Cape Town and became part of the long tradition of teacher-activists in his country. He was active in educational struggles in 1980 and 1985-86 and was involved in the Western Cape precursor to today's South African Democratic Teachers' Union. Subsequently, he worked for two affiliates of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), South Africa's largest trade union federation. In the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union he was a national collective bargaining coordinator involved in strategizing the union's overall approach to collective bargaining. More recently he has worked as a local organizer for the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). Currently he is an International Project Officer at the Workers' Education Association in Manchester, England.

What do you think have been the most significant gains for labor since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994?

The answer to this question has to be considered in the larger context of the most significant gains for black people or ordinary people who were disenfranchised. The most important gain was the formal abolition of apartheid as an institutional form of racial separation and oppression. The fact that that formal institution does not exist means that workers and ordinary people have access to voting rights, to due process of law, to mobility and to protection in terms of democratic rights. That is an undeniable gain and nothing can take that away from people. That's important to stress because much of what I am going to say is extremely critical of the South African government but I think it must be borne in mind that the achievement of democracy is a milestone.

In terms of labor and of trade unions more narrowly, I think that the democratic benefits are having the freedoms to organize, to assemble and to express and articulate opinions in trade unions free from direct oppression and the space to organize in areas that were not traditionally there. One can point to some of the organizational rights that have been gained by domestic workers and farmworkers that were not there under apartheid. So, there has been some progress with regard to some organizational rights.

What about benefits such as stricter regulations of safety

standards in the mining industry?

It is hard to look at some of those issues without seeing them in every way as a particular kind of South African trade-off. What is gained in the sense that the law offers some levels of increased protection for workers is always offset against who actually polices and enforces that protection. The current balance of forces is on the side of the ruling class. This class has succeeded in encapsulating liberatory language about some of these rights but has shifted the onus of protection as far as possible from any authority such as the state and state structures. The enforceability of some of these issues, including the health and safety provisions in mining, is actually extremely limited. So I don't honestly see those as significant gains for workers in the mines at all.

So laws that exist on the books are not necessarily implemented to the full in practice?

Yes, many laws are fairly well formulated from the point of view of employers, so that the extent to which a company can be fined or that corporate directors are held liable for major negligence is extremely limited. So, the net effect in an industry where there continues to be an enormous number of deaths has been that very little real statutory weight is given to provisions that can actually stop accidents and the high incidence of deaths on the mines.

Do these legislative reforms, albeit limited, actually deepen divisions amongst the workers in that they are restricted to a few well-organized sectors? For example, does the fact that the mining industry might have made significant legal gains, even if they are not adequately enforced, make those workers a relatively privileged group compared to others?

That is part of a larger debate. Certainly, workers who are organized or who are employed are in a better position materially than workers who are unemployed or disorganized. It is a fact that there is a distinction between a certain layer of the working class and other broader layers. But there is an argument that because of those differences, there is a difference of material interests between the narrower layer of workers who do have access to organization and certain benefits and those workers who do not. I think that argument is false. In any country, at any level of development, the organized working class is always a relatively small grouping, and the fact that they have won certain benefits through collective struggle is a victory for the working class as a whole. One can envision societies where

all benefits are shared by everyone; that is a goal of struggles. But you can't condemn the partial victories of some workers as therefore setting them apart from other workers.

What about other divisions in the working class? Organized labor in South Africa has been portrayed in the past few years as a kind of labor aristocracy vis-a-vis unorganized or unemployed workers. Some economists, such as Nicoli Natrass, have argued that because organized labor participates in the Tripartite Alliance and other forums, it has a voice in government and is part of the new system, in contrast to unemployed workers, workers in the informal economy and rural people, who have no voice in government and are therefore excluded from the new dispensation.¹ What is your response to that kind of argument?

There are a number of legs to the Nicoli Natrass type of argument, all of which are false. The first one assumes that there is a close, sympathetic relationship between the labor movement and government, that by definition government will be soft on labor and, therefore, that labor is an elite. But the government's adoption of the Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR), its commitment to fiscal discipline and its approach to all forms of legislation, whether labor or housing legislation, has indicated that it is strongly neo-liberal and pro-private capital. Nicoli Natrass has got that relationship wrong. This is not a labor movement that has a sympathetic government. That leg of the argument is false.

The second point is that organized formations such as unions or community organizations, historically in a range of different countries, are not necessarily a statistical majority of the working class. This reflects the fact that when people organize against oppression and against authoritarian regimes it is incredibly difficult. It is to their credit that they have succeeded to the extent that they have in representing those people for whom they have won some rights and material benefits. That is something to be celebrated and not condemned.

But the relationship between organized workers and the poor more generally is a much more organic one. Firstly, organized workers are still today some of the most low-paid workers in the country. Public sector workers in local government in small towns can earn as little as 400 Rands a month. That is well below any empirically set standards such as poverty datum lines. These are organized workers in the public sectors. Even today mine workers are incredibly low paid. The unemployed in a country which has very little social welfare network actually live through the wages and benefits earned by the employees. They are the sisters, the brothers, the spouses, the children and the parents of employed people. It is very hard in South Africa to find distinct categories of people who are employed and have privileges and are fighting against the unemployed who lack privileges. Those distinct categories are in the minds of analysts rather than in reality.

That does not mean that COSATU and the labor movement more generally are not faced with the problem of how to organize the unemployed and the rural poor. It is a question of how to forge a stronger movement that goes beyond organized labor. This is the stuff of political struggle. It was

one of the successes of the liberation movement in the 1980s, that the United Democratic Front and its affiliates achieved enormous success in building a movement that was far broader than the trade union movement. That is certainly a challenge facing COSATU today — to consciously and systematically bring together the struggles of homeless people, of people in the rural areas, etc. Quite honestly, I don't think COSATU has been successful in that. But that is not of the same order as saying that organized workers are an elite group. It is an organizational and political question and a responsibility of COSATU and the labor movement more generally.

What about women workers? In most countries the established discourses and images of the trade union movement have been male dominated. How does that compare with the South African experience, and what are the difficulties in dealing with the demands and needs of women workers? Can any generalizations be made about the experience of women workers since 1994 and about any developing trade union strategies?

One of the healthy developments of the trade union movement since its revival in the 1970s and during its rapid growth in the 1980s was that there was a conscious undertaking to promote the empowerment of women in society as a whole and in trade union structures. I say "conscious" in the sense that there are formal undertakings in practically every resolution, education program and policy adopted by each trade union affiliate and by COSATU as a whole. I cannot say much about the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) because I do not have any real experience with it but I would imagine that it would have similar undertakings. So at the level of discourse, those undertakings are there.

But that is a far cry from the actual experience of women workers and the degree to which women workers are active in staff shop steward layers and the upper echelons of trade unions.² There is a disjuncture between a discourse preaching and exhorting equality and the empowerment of women and calling for the reform of trade union structures to encourage this and the reality on the ground. There are a number of explanations to consider. Before we look at the limitations of the trade union structures themselves, we have to start with the fact that one of the by-products of the apartheid migrant labor policy is that it strongly, more than in the so-called "normal" international division of labor, broke down relations of men and women in terms of shared responsibility, not only in the home but in the workplace. So, demographically, South Africa has had sharply skewed gender relations in the workplace. It was only in the 1950s that particularly large numbers of women came in from the rural areas to the urban areas and were absorbed into the workplace. That is relatively late in comparison with other industrialized countries. So even today in manufacturing and in large sections of the public sector, organized workers are still strongly skewed toward male experience and male participation.

I think another by-product of apartheid is a result of its attempt to entrench a vision of tribal identities. This led to the preservation of certain patriarchal features associated

with those tribal identities. Even today those act as a break on women workers and women in general rising up and becoming more empowered. This is an enormous challenge facing COSATU and the democratic movement more generally.

Can you give me an example?

One can point to issues of traditional domestic relations which have been entrenched over long periods — how women from a Zulu background, for example, were expected to be respectful in the presence of men and were not encouraged to articulate their opinions and participate directly in structures that are male dominated. Insofar as apartheid attempted to preserve these identities in a way that suited the requirements of capital accumulation in South Africa you find that those cultural identity questions have been preserved more than in many other countries. Elsewhere, the experience of urbanization in, say, the 19th century might have superseded these perspectives and cultural approaches as to how family and gender roles are constituted. So that even today the question of where people live, the relations of people in the rural and urban areas, the division of labor, the payment of *lobola* [brideprice] if you want to marry a woman and the role women play culturally in terms of their interactions with men, those questions still loom large in the workplace and in meeting places of progressive organizations, such as COSATU and in the democratic movement generally. This is not because here is something endemic in trade union structures that promotes that. These are features that trade unionists have had to engage with.

Obviously there is the question of whether structures should be changed to address this question. I don't think any union can rest on its laurels and say that the current structures can be preserved intact forever. Whether they should, for instance, have local general meetings at different times that make it more convenient for women to participate, whether they should have quota systems that formally make it necessary that all structures have fifty percent female participation, these are questions which activists can engage. You have to take into consideration that many patriarchal forms are a legacy of apartheid and that it is a challenge for the union movement to change that, and they have not been entirely successful; they have not been very successful at all.

How have global competition and the pressures for privatization affected workers? Are there differences amongst different sectors? Have some sectors been more hurt than others, and what are the implications of this?

I think that the pressures of globalization on South Africa have been enormous. The South African government has also adopted an official policy, GEAR, that endorses globalization and champions the cause of international competitiveness. So, both as a result of external pressures, such as the World Trade Organization and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs agreements, as well as of the government's ideological commitment to neoliberalism, there have been enormous pressures for the removal of tariff barriers and of local industry requirements.

This has meant quite consistent job losses in the motor car manufacturing industry, for example. Initiatives such as high interest rates have meant that South African manufacturing has suffered enormously. Changes with regard to increasing capitalization in the mining industry have also meant enormous job losses there. So I would say that a combination of external factors as well as the policy of South Africa's own ruling class, which has embraced globalization enthusiastically, has meant enormous job losses. In fact, the estimates of job losses since the first democratic election have indicated increased job losses in comparison with job losses prior to the elections. This is one of the huge failures that the government cannot explain away when it tries to justify the economic strategy of GEAR — that unemployment is increasing rather than decreasing.

Has unemployment increased since the adoption of GEAR?

GEAR was more of a summary of policies that the government had already adopted in the run in to 1994. From 1994, the key sectors that were the highest employers, namely state industries, such as the railways, and mines and engineering have been areas of major job losses. Moreover, along with the adoption of GEAR, the government has given an undertaking to business that it is going to prune the public sector. Pruning the public sector does not mean job losses for high level bureaucrats but job losses for ordinary workers in the public sector. Those are people in the railways, public utilities and in lower level jobs in the old bantustans. There is a formal government undertaking to cut the public sector as part of the GEAR project.

How does this relate to the fact that there was an upsurge in industrial action in 1998, which has been called "the year of fire."³ Do you link the increase in industrial action to the changes associated with GEAR?

It is quite interesting to see the rhythms of class struggle going into 1994 and after. If one looks at these rhythms one can understand why there was a dramatic upsurge in labor struggles in 1998. I think that there was an enormous sense of expectation on the part of ordinary people that life would improve after the 1994 elections. Certainly, for organized workers there was a belief that material conditions on the factory floor, both working conditions and wages, would be significantly improved. I think also from the side of employers there was a hesitancy to confront those expectations of organized workers because many employers — and I use the word employer deliberately as distinct from the ruling class more generally — were hesitant in not knowing what the relationship of the African National Congress (ANC) with organized labor would be. In response to the wage-related demands in 1994, there was a hesitancy on the part of employers to take an intransigent position.

The significance of 1998 is the intransigence amongst the employers in relation to wage and other demands — particularly wage demands — at a time when politically employers became confident that the ANC represented their interests. So there was no need, in 1998, to adopt the "softly, softly" approach. I think that those struggles in 1998 were a result of expectations on the part of workers not being fulfilled and a hardening attitude on the part of

the bosses. This attitude indicates a greater realization on the part of the owners of capital that they have a much more confident relationship with the government.

It appears that violence has been increasing since 1994. What are your thoughts about this?

I think violence is increasing for two reasons. The first reason is the massive increase in unemployment and the breakdown of social services, coupled with the increasing movement of people from the rural areas into urban townships and city ghettos. There is a massive movement of disaffected people with no jobs into areas that were formerly the domain of white and middle class people. The breakdown of formal apartheid has meant that large numbers of people have moved into the cities. I think that the absence of any adequate social services leads to crime.

The second reason for the increasing violence is political. If you look at instances in Natal and Gauteng, the wave of organized state violence that the previous regime spawned through Inkatha, in turn spawned a response by people to defend themselves, through the formation of self-defense units. That layer of people have not found a means to absorb their energies, either politically or economically. I think that violence and crime provides an outlet for their energies.

In the rural areas there is the example of increasing killings of farmers. Organizing in the agricultural sector is extremely difficult. COSATU's farmworkers' affiliate, the South African Agricultural, Plantation and Allied Workers' Union, has just been downgraded to a project because it has not succeeded in organizing farmworkers in significant numbers.⁴ Moreover, the ANC has failed to deliver in terms of increased land security. The promises made to labor tenants have not been fulfilled and white farmers have been kicking more and more labor tenants off the land. It is ironic that in the public domain one hears of legislation that provides increased security for labor tenants but, again, the absence of the means to implement and enforce this legislation means that white farmers kick labor tenants off their farms. This means that there is a sudden massive increase of people who are socially dislocated in the rural areas. This leads to a kickback against farmers and an increase in rural violence.⁵ The commonality in explaining both urban and rural violence is the failed delivery of people's social expectations. I think that violence is inevitable in those circumstances.

But don't you think that the ANC realizes this? It seems like a powder keg.

If you are committed to a rapidly decreasing budget deficit, if you are committed to rapid privatization, you cannot deliver social services. It is an inherent contradiction in the nature of neo-liberalism that it cannot deliver social services. Particularly in a country with our history this is a powder keg. I think that the only response for the state is to get tough. But I doubt that will work either. I don't think that the government has a way out of it, even though they may realize intellectually that this is a problem. But as long as it can be contained by increasing violence of the police against people, they will live with it.

It is curious that the ANC, with its history of pragmatism, is so ideologically committed and is not taking a more pragmatic approach.

I don't think they have a choice. Once you make the class shift you become the most enthusiastic. It is often the converts who are the most enthusiastic. There is no solution within the government's current economic policies.

What about national or ethnic identities as a basis for political mobilization or dissent, such as African nationalism or any other sub-national identities?

It is possible that the failure to ensure an adequate delivery of services and fulfillment of expectations provides fertile ground for resuscitation of tribal and ethnic identities. The South African liberation movement has not had a history of mobilizing people on ethnic grounds. There is a view that sees these questions as something the left has neglected and argues that the left should address the positive aspects of ethnic identity. Given South Africa's history of identity being imposed and associated with separatism and oppression, the discourse of the progressive movement was directed towards unity. There is no history of progressive ethnic identity movements. That has been the prerogative of right-wing forces.

I would argue that any kind of anti-ANC opposition that plays the ethnic identity card would be part of such a right wing initiative rather than a progressive initiative to contest neo-liberalism. It's a powder keg that exists and that could blow up. I could see Zulu or Coloured identity, for instance, as cards played by right-wing forces within the ruling class. If there were threats to the current neo-liberal agenda I could see right-wing elements playing that card. I can't see a progressive agenda associated with ethnic identity or tribalism. I would rule that out.

With regard to the Tripartite Alliance, to what extent have the trade union leaderships, either of COSATU or its affiliates, been able to exert political controls over their organizations binding them into the Alliance as supposed partners in the new South Africa? For instance, are there controls over decision-making procedures in the unions or are political identities constructed in a manner which construes critics as disloyal?

Very much so. That is at the cutting edge of explaining why South Africa has a recent militant tradition, at least among the shop steward layer, of strong commitment to socialism and radical transformation and yet, officially, through the union structures, the union leadership have accommodated themselves with neo-liberalism. Otherwise, you cannot explain a relationship between a very articulate and very radicalized shop steward layer and an official discourse that preaches the virtues of accommodation, privatization, etc. It is pretty much COSATU policy to say that while we are in the Tripartite Alliance we need to promote the ANC as our organization for an extended period of time, that it would be suicidal, reactionary and divisive to be a critic now because the ANC itself is faced with challenges from the organized right wing of the old regime or international right-wing forces. So there are very strong informal and formal pressures to maintain consensus around

the Tripartite Alliance.

I don't think you can understand this without reference to the role of the South African Communist Party (SACP). It acts as the cement holding the Alliance together. It has had a particular history and built up an image, which suits itself to maintain, of being the cement of the Tripartite Alliance. On the one hand, it has the mythology associated with socialism and communism and, therefore, it can tap into perspectives among shop stewards who think that socialism is the way forward for humanity. On the other hand, it is thoroughly and completely integrated into senior ANC structures and thoroughly and actively convinced that revolution and radical transformation is a distant project. Therefore, it is able to straddle the radical side of the movement and speak their language and yet at the same time endorse loyalty. To understand that you would have to go into the actual polemics.

Don't you feel that many South African Communists genuinely believe that the only way forward to socialism is through the Tripartite Alliance? Are they not genuinely committed to socialism and see the Alliance as the most viable path?

It is a difficult question to answer. Certainly if you look at the SACP's own history, prior to the 1990s one can understand a perspective that says the immediate priority is national democratic revolution and that socialism belongs to some second stage or some other stage of the struggle. This is a classic Stalinist perspective. You can see how there is a logic that would encourage a certain degree of loyalty to the ANC at that particular stage, with socialism being a long-term goal.

I find it harder to understand those approaches now, when that logic would mean that there would be an honest opposition. But today the SACP is not an honest opposition, it is an enthusiastic spin doctor. There is no other way of saying that. Its upper echelons, its Central Committee members are serving government ministers carrying out policies. Alec Erwin, for instance, is a SACP Central Committee member and Minister of Trade and Industry, lowering trade and tariff barriers, deciding about unemployment, etc. There is no way of seeing it other than that. One can point to the senior bureaucrats surrounding ANC President Thabo Mbeki, writing papers on the nature of the state who are high level SACP Central Committee members. It seems to me that there is no other way of understanding relations in the labor movement and its uncomfortable relationship with neo-liberalism without understanding the role of the SACP.

What about the rumors that Thabo Mbeki is going to take a harsher line against the SACP? In a speech at the SACP's 10th Congress in July 1998, Mbeki seemed to be harshly critical of the SACP.⁶ How do you interpret that?

I don't think that speech was meant for the SACP. It was meant more generally for those leftists who retain perspectives of radical transformation. It is significant that immediately after the Congress the SACP put out statements denying that there were significant differences and claiming that everything was harmonious. I think too much

was made of the fact that this appears to be an attack on the Party which has been a very loyal partner of the ANC.

The question of whether after the June elections there is going to be a purge of the SACP is part of a larger question of whether the ANC sees a continual need to retain a relationship with the labor movement in which organized movement will be held captive. Now, that depends. If the labor movement — by which I mean shop-floor level — continues to exhibit the kind of militancy that it did in 1998, then I think that a relationship with the SACP will continue. I think that senior people in the ANC realize that the SACP would have an important role to play and that it would be very unstrategic to mount an attack on the SACP or to try to drive it out when it acts to preserve the relationship between the ANC and the labor movement, for the purposes of co-opting the labor movement. You would not want to drive out your trump card.

If, however, there is a turnaround and the labor movement goes into such a serious slump that strike activity declines and membership of COSATU falls, then the significance of the SACP would very likely fade insofar as its role as a bridgehead would be less important. I somehow don't think that Thabo Mbeki will make a full frontal attack on the SACP. I think that he is too clever for that. I think that he realizes that possibly for years there will be an interest in maintaining unity between the ANC and organized labor.

How does participation in the Tripartite Alliance affect the ordinary trade union member, i.e., those who are not in trade union posts? How does the existence of the Alliance affect their political values? Are they critical of it? Do they want to remain in it? Are there any who support other political parties?

South Africa is in a kind of interregnum stage. Generally, the active members in terms of decision-making in structures are the shop steward layer. I certainly have a sense of what shop stewards say based on my experience of working with some of them. Insofar as they have organic relationships with members on the shop floor, maybe these views are articulated there, as well. There are a range of positions. There are still people who feel a sense to loyalty to the ANC despite its twists and turns. They feel that the ANC still represents a long-standing tradition of struggle against oppression, and they are not prepared to ditch that. There are others who are strongly critical and realize that the ANC does not represent their interests and that it sold out but that they do not know what else there may well be. That is also a comment on the state of anyone else. The people who are in the public discourse, the public domain — the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the Azanian People's Organization, etc. — in most ways are aligned to the right and not to the left of the ANC. You have ridiculous things like the PAC putting out a statement calling for COSATU to ban strikes for a certain period of time to enable the country to develop. It is not as if you have a significant left which can provide an alternative pole rallied against the ANC.

That is the critical point.

Yes, that is the critical point. In the absence of that what

you do have are significant critical voices. For instance, at COSATU's congress you had workers dancing and singing "Asimfuni uGEAR", which means "We don't want GEAR," at the time that Mandela was making a speech there.

At the same time?

Yes, at the same time. But this does not mean that sentiment will be translated tomorrow into a new social movement or a new party. It is a question that is debated. I think it might take years before that type of sentiment takes a specific form. Short of that, I don't think any other political organization besides the ANC has a significant presence among organized workers. I don't think that some of the organizations which have at times been seen as to the left of the ANC are actually to the left of the ANC. There obviously are smaller political groupings dotted all over the country but they don't have a significant presence among organized labor. So the significant critical voices which exist among shop stewards — which are critical — are not part of a broader political movement.

Interesting developments can be seen during 1998, the "year of fire," developments which started around April and which peaked in August 1998, where you suddenly had a plethora of strikes and confrontations, with national strikes by NUMSA and the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union, for instance. Yet in that same year, on October 30, you had the Jobs Summit — a meeting of government, business and organized labor which was intended to produce an employment strategy to promote job creation.

This is a case in point of how militancy could be subsumed under a summit that delivered nothing. By the end of the Jobs Summit COSATU ended up endorsing GEAR, despite all the rhetoric, at meeting after meeting, attacking GEAR. At the summit they endorsed what they called the macro-economic policy of the government — which is GEAR. In exchange for that, government agreed to institute a number of projects. But if you examine the projects which are supposed to be job-creation projects, they were all existing projects. There is not a single new project that Alec Erwin drew out of a hat in exchange for COSATU's endorsement of GEAR. All the projects are precisely the kind of neo-liberal projects associated with job creation, namely promoting small enterprises, tourism projects, etc. There was no undertaking, as COSATU had demanded, to have a massive state-driven housing program that could have led to job creation. In fact, COSATU withdrew that demand, which had been one of its cornerstones when it went into the summit. It was quietly dropped.⁷

In exchange for a promise of something?

I suppose to be fair to COSATU leadership there was a promise that there would be an official cabinet committee to oversee the actual implementation of the Job Summit. But the actual details of the Job Summit do not deliver anything. So I think that the Job Summit marks another political watershed in that it actually represented the moment when the COSATU leadership turned and signaled that it regarded cooperation with the ANC as more important than fighting for the demands of its membership. There is no other way of putting it than that. But it is significant that the

Minister who coordinated the Job Summit was Alec Erwin, ex-NUMSA activist and senior member of the SACP. That was an important card played — that Erwin could deliver the labor movement because he had the right credentials.

How far does COSATU's participation in the Alliance affect its relationship with NACTU? Is there any possibility of a broader trade union federation or does the existence of the Tripartite Alliance preclude that?

On COSATU's relationship with NACTU and the issue of broader trade union unity, the existence of the Tripartite Alliance has stood in the way. But people have argued the need for unity with NACTU on the assumption that both NACTU and the PAC were a left wing or more progressive or less politically tied down alternative to COSATU and the ANC. Trade union unity is important. But I don't have much comfort from left voices that see a relationship with NACTU as necessary in building a progressive counterweight to the ANC. I think that along with the PAC, NACTU's own fortunes have declined so much. Politically it has moved far to the right. It has become quite a champion of union investment companies for example. The first initiative to form union investment companies came from NACTU. So, far from representing a counterweight of organized workers, forging unity with COSATU, it doesn't represent that. The fact that they have moved so far to the right ironically might open up a space for an alliance with COSATU but from the right. Instead of being a critical left voice of COSATU's relationship with the Tripartite Alliance, and this is a speculation, NACTU may well drop its concern with politics and make common cause with COSATU but not as a very progressive counterweight. At any rate, I don't see NACTU as a significant player.

Aside from the SACP, what other left-wing discourses or perspectives are available to critics of the ANC? That raises the question of whether there is space to the left of the ANC — there would appear to be because of the ANC's neo-liberal policies?

I don't think that South Africa has ever lacked left discourses and critical voices. They still exist. I think the weakness of much left political discourse is that both the left voices which are critical of the ANC and the SACP lack any presence in the trade union movement, certainly in the 1990s. I think there was a presence in the 1980s but not in the 1990s.

Why is that? What has changed?

In some instances some people made errors in seeing NACTU as a progressive alternative. As well, there was an underestimation of political loyalty to the ANC and a premature call for splits. Some socialists underestimated the significance of the 1994 elections. They underestimated the attention that workers and people generally gave to the elections as a victory against apartheid and the fact that people were looking for unity rather than differences at that point. I think a number of critical errors were made. Thus, instead of emerging as a left voice within the labor movement that was distinctive from the SACP, too many people on the left were either driven out or prematurely called for separate alliances and separate initiatives and separate vot-

ing blocs at the time of the elections. The result is that they do not have a significant presence now.

Moreover, the left was quite ill-prepared for a long time to deal with the implications of the collapse of the Soviet Union and how those international developments would turn many of the intelligentsia on the left to the right. Many local socialists misread the balance of forces, both locally and internationally in the 1990s.

They thought that the left internationally was stronger than it really was?

I think that they overestimated the strength of the left movement internationally in the 1990s. This informed their tactics, which were inappropriate. There have been occasional voices within the SACP at various times. For years COSATU has had a formal resolution to call a conference of the left which would include a range of tendencies on the left. By the time this conference was convened in November 1994, under the title "Socialist Conference for Reconstruction and Development," those critical voices in the SACP had been successfully silenced by the majority in the SACP.⁸ Some of the weaknesses of the non-SACP left were exposed at the conference — their lack of a coherent program, for example. So the conference petered out and produced only one or two resolutions. There was no sense of continuity afterwards. I think that the non-SACP left needs to critically examine its own errors. I am not saying that to write people off from history but to emphasize that there is a need for self-criticism.

What about other approaches that might be influenced by syndicalism or direct action? Is there any space for alternative socialist experiences now? One can say that the South African left is in a mess and that it has withered and that there needs to be a break from past traditions. Is there space for other left discourses or for a broader labor or workers' party?

The space is there insofar as the ANC is embracing neo-liberalism and there is an increasing sense that the SACP does not represent an alternative to the ANC. A critical tradition exists among the shop steward layer and is there as a resource for galvanizing a left alternative to the ANC. But the absence of any direct involvement in organizations of the working class on the part of some of the erstwhile left is a big weakness. The space is there but there is virtually no one to deliver — there are only a very few voices.

Regarding the question of whether there are other left traditions such as syndicalism, one has also to look at what has happened to those traditions internationally. Social democracy has moved so far to the right that it is embracing neo-liberalism. Some of the positions expressed by social democracy in the 1950s and 1960s have long since disappeared internationally, so it would be hard to see that as a left alternative. Syndicalism has never had and could not have had deep roots in South Africa because for much of South Africa's history black unions did not exist and African workers were not allowed to organize. So, a direct action union-based social movement could not have existed outside of the directly political domain. There could not have been anything else besides the ICUs, the CNETUs, the

SACTUs.⁹ Any distinction between politics aimed at the state and union-based formations was precluded by South African conditions. I don't think that you can dream a syndicalist tradition out of nothing.

I think that the other variant of a workers' party is the key issue of the day. It is an idea that has been floating around. It was formally adopted by NUMSA at its congress preceding the 1994 election. Although it is an idea whose day is here, it needs a lot more political clarification. It needs a lot more programmatic clarification as to what it would be, how it would be formed, in what way it would be an alternative to the ANC and how it would relate to the ANC and to other voices on the left. These are questions that should be debated in South Africa. There is a space for this. I think it is necessary and that the space exists. I don't know whether the sufficient conditions exist. That is a matter of political engagement.

Notes

¹See, for instance, Nicoli Nattrass and Jeremy Seekings, "Citizenship and Welfare in South Africa: Deracialisation and Inequality in a Labour-Surplus Economy," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 31, 3, 1997, pp. 452-481.

²A recent survey indicates that women constitute 41% of the trade union officials in COSATU and its affiliates but that they are concentrated in the lowest-paid and dead-end administrative positions. Interviews with women trade union officials indicate rampant sexism, discrimination and sexual harassment by male trade unionists. See Malehoko Tshoedi, "In the Union... Women Union Officials Speak Out," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 2, April 1998, pp. 54-58.

³Jeremy Baskin and Renée Gravitsky, "Year of Fire: Industrial Action in 1998," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 6, December 1998, pp. 6-13.

⁴See also Bheki Ngubane, "SAAPAWU in 1999," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 23, 1, February 1999, pp. 43-46.

⁵Cf. Ngubane, "SAAPAWU in 1999," p. 46.

⁶Statement of the President of the African National Congress, Thabo Mbeki, at the 10th Congress of the SACP, July 2, 1998, <http://www.anc.org.za>.

⁷For other views see Malcolm Ray, "The Jobs Summit: Conflicting Agendas," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 2, April 1998, pp. 14-17; Etienne Vlok, "Jobs and houses: the Jobs Summit," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 22, 6, December 1998, pp. 26-30; and Edward Cottle, "Jobs Summit Fails to Deliver," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 23, 1, February 1999, pp. 76-78.

⁸See also Allison Drew, "Building Democracy in Post-Apartheid South Africa: The Contested Agenda," and Discussion Documents presented to the Socialist Conference for Reconstruction and Development, November 5-6, 1994, in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, XV, 1, 1995, pp. 1-4 and 80-90 respectively.

⁹The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) was formed in 1919 as a union of black dockworkers. In the 1920s it began organizing rural workers. It disintegrated in the 1930s. The Council of Non-European Trade Unions (CNETU) was a black trade union federation of the 1940s. The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), a black trade union federation of the 1950s, was part of the Congress Alliance formed around the ANC.