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Why labour can't get ANC to work

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By Mcebisi Ndletyana

It's true. History does repeat itself. Perhaps with even more frequency in our case than is usual. Yet, the ANC-led tripartite alliance partners greet every recurrence with an even louder expression of shock and deep disappointment at unmet expectations. Then, they recommit, professing even more sincerity and vigour to realise their objectives. The structure of the alliance, however, remains as before.



But, they somehow manage to bring themselves to believing that the outcome will be different this time around. It's a dance that the tripartite alliance has come to master.

The outcome of Cosatu's recent gathering was déjà vu. Zwelinzima Vavi's Secretariat's Report decried the moribund state of the South African Communist Party. Rather than assume the vanguard role that history has accorded it vis-à-vis the working people, the party, Vavi writes, is largely inactive awakening only when deployments are discussed.

Most provincial secretaries of the party, including one at the national office, serve in government, leaving the various secretariat offices unattended.

Cosatu is nonetheless sympathetic. It ascribes their zeal for deployment to the party's inability to pay salaries. That's why the workers offered to pay Blade Nzimande's salary on condition he returned to full-time employment at the party's headquarters. The ineffectiveness of the party, according to Cosatu, has compromised the working class struggle over which it is supposed to provide leadership. But, Nzimande is convinced that he can do both jobs effectively. His presence in the cabinet, Nzimande believes, will block the ANC veering right-wards. The party's faithful obviously agrees.

It's as if there is no precedence from which to learn. Think back to pre-2004. The cabinet had no less than five Communists. They all steered Thabo Mbeki's austerity policies. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi stared down the striking workers, refusing to heed their salary demands, whilst Jeff Radebe went around convincing everyone about the virtues of privatisation. Fellow communists denounced them as sell-outs. The Party's 1998 Congress even ousted the amicable communist Charles Nqakula, whom they considered too cosy with Mbeki, with the then fiery Nzimande.

But now that they're in the cabinet, Nzimande and his comrades, Rob Davies and Ebrahim Patel are no different from their predecessors. Nzimande's Secretariat even disapproves of colleagues criticising Jacob Zuma. Just the other day, David Masedo, then chairperson of the Young Communist League, expressed disapproval of Zuma's family hogging headlines with empowerment deals. Black Economic Empowerment, which the party had shouted down as elitism, Masedo enlightened us, has been replaced by the even more unflattering spectre of "ZEE - Zuma Economic Empowerment". Rather than attract praise for sticking to the party line, Masedo was publicly rebuked and hauled before the party's disciplinary hearing. He was ordered to apologise. "What for?" Masedo asked.

Patel, a trade unionist, is now doing exactly what the then communist Radebe was doing in Mbeki's cabinet. He released an economic strategy, the New Growth Path (NGP), as Cosatu puts it, "with no input from the ANC and the alliance". The NGP, Cosatu complains, "falls far short" and "will require an overhaul". "Its weaknesses", labour says, "demonstrate that it was not a product of collective wisdom of alliance processes". Isn't this how Gear was introduced?

But, "Zuma's ANC is a lot friendlier to labour than Mbeki's", is a common refrain. Indeed Zuma does seem to enjoy spending time with the unions. But, the friendliness hasn't translated into any tangible gains. Polokwane promised decent jobs, but ANC's Secretary-General, Gwede Mantashe, who is also the party's chairperson, is no longer keen on pressing that demand. "A job is a job" he said the other day. A former trade unionist himself, Mantashe reminded his former colleagues that the government is not a trade union. It cannot insist on how much workers must be paid. Rather, it's up to workers to fight for their own wage demands.

Cosatu may have indeed come to realise that Polokwane was a false victory. That explains the lack of enthusiasm at Zuma's arrival at their recent Cosatu gathering. Vavi's secretariat report is even less optimistic about the influence of labour over its government ally. The report notes that while Zuma's ANC lacks the class agenda which Mbeki's followed "with military precision", it is no less resistant to a working class project: "The new tendency largely depends on demagogue zig-zag political rhetoric in the most spectacular and unprincipled fashion and is hellbent on material gain, corruption and looting". Harsh words indeed.

The report is effectively implying that Cosatu is being taken for a ride. One moment it reaches an agreement with the ANC, only for the latter to renege later. An alliance summit held in November 2009, for instance, agreed to form a task team that would formulate the macro-economic policy and that the Minister Pravin Gordhan would consult prior to drawing up a budget, but "neither of these materialised". The following year in April at a bilateral meeting with the ANC, when Cosatu raised its own policy

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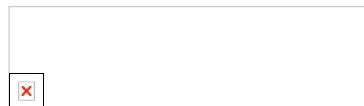
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perspectives and concerns about the alliance, "it was subjected to ridicule, caricatured, dismissed and misrepresented".

Yet, labour leaders had to apologise for the missives their members directed at Zuma during the 2010 public sector strike. The ANC accepted the apology and labour saw that as an opportunity to raise outstanding issues. It decried the emergence of the "predatory elite" and "political paralysis" of the ANC leadership. The ANC's mood changed instantly. Vavi's report notes: "The manner of presentation; the anger combined with arrogance, positional postures, insults and rough language appeared designed to provoke a walkout by Cosatu".

Labour refuses to walk out, however. And, it's not the first time they've felt provoked to sever the alliance. Mbeki warned years back that perhaps the time had arrived for the ruling party to consider the principle: "Better fewer, but better". The Left refused to walk out, insisting that the "ANC is a disciplined force of the Left". And, they successfully ousted Mbeki, replacing him with the friendly and singing Jacob Zuma. But, Zuma zig-zags and is indecisive, they complain. Labour is back to square one.

The ANC cannot be any more than what it is currently. It is a multi-class organisation, as Mantashe himself ironically reminded Vavi at Midrand. That's same thing that Mbeki repeatedly told Mantashe when he was a leader of mine-workers. The organisation's strength lies in fudging issues and being everything to everyone. Zuma is a typical alliance man. Exactly the kind of leader Cosatu wanted. Decisive leadership would require favouring one class interest over another. Does labour really want a return to Mbeki's style of leadership?

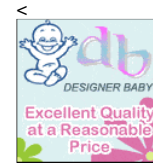
Indecisiveness is the best that labour can secure from the ruling party. It may be useful for them to make peace with that reality. There's no guarantee that a decisive Zuma or any future president would necessarily drive a left-wing agenda. It has nothing to do with personalities. That's just the nature of the ANC. They think they can transform it from within. The result has been an even more hostile ANC, accusing the left of a conspiratorial agenda to usurp the ANC. Mbeki has long left ANC leadership, but the hostile suspicion against the Left remains. It was never about Mbeki. It's the ANC simply being the ANC.

There's an increasing realisation within labour, however, that they've reached a dead end. The party explored the option of going alone, but then Zuma happened. Zuma hasn't delivered, however. That's what got Cosatu talking to other civil society organisations. That's how the end of the nationalist rule in Zambia started. Robert Mugabe is holding on for dear life in Zimbabwe, against an unrelenting labour party. Could it now be Cosatu's turn? Some think so, but are held back by the uncertainty of an unfamiliar future.

But this country does certainly need an uncompromising proponent of the working people. Look at the Aurora debacle. Children of freedom fighters scavenging on the very constituency their fathers spent their lives fighting for. I guess our leaders did not struggle so that their children could remain poor.

If the status quo persists I can already imagine, not long from now, Vavi, as leader of the ANC, talking to his successor, a furious Irvin Jim: "You see Irvin, the ANC is a multi-class organisation". Standing behind Vavi will be a clean-shaven and splendidly suited, Minister Mantashe urging him on: "Ja! Mxelele Vavi. Ayiz' i-understand' i-dynamics le ntwana' (Tell him, this young chap doesn't understand the dynamics). Déjà vu.

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