

Central Committee of South African Communist Party. May 1993  
Discussion paper for Conference

## **The role of the SACP in the transition to democracy and socialism**

The text is taken from a multiply photocopied copy of *African Communist* and certain passages are obscured, as indicated by "...".

### **Part One: The Party**

Section five of our party Manifesto (*Buildi workers' power for democratic change*) remains a valid, general guidelines to the kind of SACP that we should be building.

The general theses in Section Five need, however, to be supplemented with:

- a fuller assessment of our experience over the last two and a half years of legal, party building;
- further consideration of the path to socialism and the kind of socialism we are hoping to build in our country (and the implications these have for party building); and
- consideration of changes within the working class in South Africa (and the implicatrions these have for a party of the working class).

#### **A. The SACP since July 1990**

There are a number of very significant positive achievements that we have accomplished in the past two and a half years:

- With a membership of over 40,000 our party is now considerably larger than at any time in its history. We have fully launched 9 regions (with a further 3 launched districts on the way to forming regions). We have built up a communist presence in most of the major industrial complexes.
- The recently released Markinor opinion poll (conducted in November 1992) showed that our party is performing extremely well in terms of popularity amongst the majority African population.
- In the course of 1992 our party's catalysing role in the mass action campaign (particularly between June and August) was obvious, and led to a concerted anti-communist offensive by the regime and liberal media — a sure sign of our impact.

These achievements are particularly notable, considering that they have occurred against a backdrop of the most serious international crisis for socialism and the communist movement.

These achievements have much to do with the general character of our party's membership. Generally speaking we have a devoted, serious, and disciplined membership. Those joining our party are doing so out of ideological commitment, a conviction that our party has a principaled ideological perspective.

But the past two and a half years have also revealed many shortcomings and limitations.

In particular, we have not been able to match our major increase in membership with an adequate organisational consolidation. This in turn relates to limitations, some of which are more or less objective, and others are the result of our own weaknesses.

The most obvious, objective difficulties relate to our extremely limited resources — material and, perhaps especially, human (in terms of availability). Many of our best party members are engaged full-time (or prioritise work) in the ANC, COSATU, etc.

What has been lacking from our side has been a realistic strategic perspective of the role of the SACP, not in general terms, but specifically, in terms of:

- the concrete organisational alignment of progressive forces in our country in the present;
- the obvious possibility and need for a division of labour within the ANC-led alliance;
- our own potential strengths and obvious objective limitations.

We need to map out a few clear strategic tasks for the SACP. These tasks need to relate to what we can do well, to what we specifically stand for, and to what we can perhaps do better than others.

All this relates to:

## **B. Our Approach to Socialism**

### **What is Socialism?**

Socialism is a transitional social system between capitalism (and other systems based on class oppression and exploitation) and a fully classless, communist society.

The socialist tradition may well be of long duration. The transition may well be marked by contradictions, stagnation and major reverses. History is never a smooth process, nor does it have a guaranteed outcome.

During this transitional period, society inevitably has a “mixed,&38221; contradictory character — whether in the ownership and control of the economy, or in all other spheres of society. The socialist transition is opened up at the point at which (as our party’s *Manifesto* notes) there is a decisive “development of popular democracy to a position of dominance in all spheres — political, economic, social and cultural.” (p. 22)

In this regard the *Manifesto* lists:

- “The development of a vast network of democratic organs of popular participation in both the economy and the political system under the leadership of the working class;
- The restructuring of the state so as to establish state apparatuses shaped to relate directly and continuously with these popular structures; and
- A decisive increase of the sectors of economy under social control and subject to democratic planning. In other words, a decisive weakening of the capitalist economy

which is driven by exploitation and by the pursuit of profit rather than the needs of the people”.

In speaking of **social control** of the economy the *Manifesto* notes that:

- This democratic participation is compatible with various forms of ownership of the means of production. These include state, municipal, collective, co-operative and small-scale, non-exploitative family owned enterprises. In other words, state ownership (or nationalisation) is neither ... form of socialist ownership.

There is no magic blueprint for socialism. Socialism is also not a foreign country. If we are to build socialism in South Africa, it will have to be rooted in our own realities, our own rich experience and traditions of revolutionary struggles.

But is socialism possible “in one country”?

### **Socialism in One Country?**

When the Bolsheviks began the socialist revolution in 1917, they saw their own revolution as a precursor, even as a holding operation, for a major socialist revolution that would sweep through the more advanced capitalist countries of western Europe in a matter of years, if not months. Traditionally, socialism had always been seen as an internationalist task.

When, by the early 1920s, it was clear that the revolution in the West had been rolled back, an isolated Soviet Union was faced with a terrible choice: deepen the process of socialist democracy, with all the risks of possible defeat, or embark on a forced march of industrialisation to catch up (at least militarily) with the imperialist powers. It was this latter course that was chosen, not without an extended and bitter inner-Party (and indeed intra-Comintern) struggle.

This choice and the circumstances under which it was taken has had much to do with the subsequent history of the former Soviet Union — the outstanding achievements and the terrible distortions and ultimate stagnation and collapse.

Under the banner of “socialism in one country”, and at huge cost, a backward feudal country was transformed, in dec- ... about the desirability and/or feasibility of his particular process in the Soviet Union. The question we pose here is: Is the path of “socialism in one country” a possibility in South Africa?

We believe it is highly improbable. Among the major factors permitting a “socialism in one country” path of development in the former Soviet Union were:

- its vast territory;
- its massive, untapped natural resources;
- its huge population — over 200 million; and
- the major dislocation of the world capitalist system in the 1920s through to the mid-1940s.

These factors do not apply to South Africa, or to the world in which we live. This is not to say that we cannot make major revolutionary advances **towards** socialism within our own

country. But the construction, deepening and defence of socialism is, at best, highly improbable within our own country **on its own**. The cause of socialism is not advanced (it is discredited among the working masses) by premature announcements of its implementation.

This is not to preach passivism or defeatism. But it does point to the absolute necessity for an internationalist revolutionary perspective and practice. Despite its dominance and its resilience, the world capitalist system is presently in deep structural crisis. There are major dislocations between the so-called North and South. Within many of the main capitalist centres, internal structural contradictions are sharpening.

More and more capitalism shows itself to be without answers to (in fact, it was the main cause of) the main crises ... massive and growing inequalities. The advance to socialism within our own country depends considerably on the regrouping and resurgence of left forces world-wide in the face of these challenges.

### **Our Critique of bureaucratic socialism**

In our *Manifesto* (and also in the earlier *Path to Power*) we rejected the administrative command economic systems of bureaucratic socialism.

We have also committed ourselves in our Manifesto and in our Constitution to:

- multi-party democracy and regular elections;
- a justiciable bill of rights;
- “numerous independent mass democratic formations”;
- both representative **and** participatory democracy, and the general empowerment of the people.

Our criticisms of distorted socialism and our positive commitments to certain democratic values will, however, simply remain piecemeal or, even worse, look like belated concessions, defensive attempts to “prove our democratic credentials” ... **UNLESS THEY ARE RELATED TO** a coherent approach to the kind of socialism we are trying to build.

Indeed, our criticism of the administrative command system, bureaucratism and our support for representative and participatory democracy **ARE** implicitly part of a coherent approach to socialism. But we have not adequately developed this.

### **Positive lessons from the critique of bureaucratic socialism**

... equation of this with democracy has meant in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe the withering away of any mass democratic movement (including effective trade unions). There is no place for wage bargaining, for instance, let alone trade union involvement in policy formation, if everything is centrally (and bureaucratically) planned.

In turn, the administrative command system went hand in hand with:

- the one-party state (and the disappearance of effective representative democracy);
- bureaucratism;
- which in turn spawned unconstitutionality and, in the Stalin years in particular, massive criminal abuses.

Our party has already condemned these errors and injustices. But our condemnation, so far, has often tended to be a moral criticism. There is nothing wrong with a moral criticism, but clearly we need to carry through a more far-reaching Marxist analysis as well.

What are the implications of all this for the socialism we should be trying to build in our country? Among the major implications are the following:

#### **The socialism we should be building**

- i. will not be (one) party-centred, or state-centred — which is not to deny the importance of both a Marxist party (or parties) and a socialist state.
- ii. that is, it will be rooted in working class and broad mass participation — both to make the socialist break-through, and to develop and deepen it.
- iii. therefore, socialism will be essentially fought for, developed and defended not bureaucratically but by a ...

... tion this means:

- i. socialism will need to be, not an SACP monopoly, but a project which comes to be endorsed overwhelmingly from within the broad ANC and MDM;
- ii. that is, a more **pluralistic notion** of socialism becomes necessary. It is a project to which we seek to win a wide range of forces (civics, trade unions, churches, youth and students, rural people, , cultural workers, other political formations, etc.). In relating to this wide range of forces, we also understand that we do not have a monopoly or a copyright on socialism. Many of these formations have deep roots in the South African working class. There is much we can learn (perhaps even about socialism) from their diverse strengths.  
The need for a more pluralistic approach to the struggle for socialism also relates to the character of the working class. The broad working class in South Africa is not homogeneous [see SOUTH AFRICAN WORKING CLASS below]
- iii. socialism is not so much a separate entity from the national democratic revolution, as a crucial part of, or stage in deepening and defending it.
- iv. therefore, in the course of the national democratic revolution we should continuously seek to create momentum **towards** socialism, capacity **for** socialism, and even elements **of** socialism. Amongst other things this means:
  - a reconstruction process that greatly increases the size and social weight of the employed and organised proletariat (this includes, amongst other things, ...
  - empowering the working class (organisationally, economically, culturally) — this includes increasing working class influence within the state, and developing and strengthening institutions of participatory and direct democracy;
  - propagating an anti-capitalist, socialist perspective.

#### **Implications of the above for party building**

- i. We are building a Communist Party within a broad ANC-led liberation alliance, and **within** a still broader mass democratic movement. The fact that there is a major ANC-led MDM, and a mass democratic movement in our country, and that the SACP is deeply rooted within them, is an enormous strength in our revolutionary struggle for socialism. It is not some unfortunate historical legacy.

Within the context of this broad popular movement we need to avoid narrow, competitive duplication of functions. The SACP, for instance, needs to avoid trying to do everything the ANC does, only with a slightly more left inflection. Instead, we need to concentrate on well-planned, quality interventions.

The SACP is certainly the most effective, the most respected and the most coherent socialist political party in our country. But the fate of socialism in our country does not depend only on the fate of the SACP. Indeed, the evolution and developing character of the ANC and MDM are also critical to this outcome.

Either way, the evolving role of the ... upon the develop ... trajectories of this overall alliance, SACP will need to adapt its own role and organisational character.

If the national liberation struggle is successfully hijacked by some liberal project, or undermined by general ch... or if our NLM unity is broken and the national democratic strategic purpose is lost, the SACP may well need to assume a more autonomous character.

In such circumstances it might, for instance, be essential to follow on building a massive and independent electoral base for the SACP, to build the SACP as a major oppositional bloc to the elected government. Such a situation in which this became a prime focus of our efforts would clearly be extremely unfortunate. It would represent a temporary (but perhaps long enduring) strategic defeat for our entire national liberation struggle. It is a possible but far from necessary, medium-term outcome.

While we must not rule out such a possibility, and while we should have the capacity to survive it, nothing of what we do now should simply concede in advance such a major defeat — a narrow, SACP “go it alone” attitude and loose, generalising and demoralising assumptions that the “ANC (in its entirety) has sold out,” etc.

There is, of course, a real and growing struggle **within** our entire NLM over strategic direction, over the class nature and character of the ANC, and against opportunism and its twin in careerism — demagogic populism. Conducting this ... struggle ... a tremendous and ... socialist perspective is one of or perhaps even **the** most important of tasks for the SACP.

- ii. The party's vanguard role is more as a generaliser, a unifier and a strategist. It seeks to play this role by winning consent **within** the broad popular movement, the new historic bloc. We do not aspire to a monopoly of power, either in making the socialist revolution, or in an ensuing socialist state. We do not operate through manipulation of allied formations, nor do we act as though we had some superior knowledge “guaranteed by the inevitable outcome of history”.
- iii. The size of the SACP is less critical than its strategic role within this broad social movement. Obviously the party needs to have a certain critical weight (with a membership of over 40,000 we already have such a weight). Quality cadre development is one critical area in which the party can make a difference.
- iv. Cadre development means, among other things, developing tens of thousands of working class activists who are capable of elaborating and sustaining the socialist perspective, in a non-dogmatic manner, through the length and breadth of the broad mass movement, and over the long haul of a difficult struggle.
- v. If the party is to play the role of a socialist vanguard by way of active relating and undogmatic engagement with a range of social forces, then the party's own internal life

needs to equip its membership for such a role. Amongst other things, this means open and dynamic debate needs to be ... itself it is important that we overcome the stifling effects of pseudo-Marxist dogmatism. The party needs to be built on a real unity, not a dogmatic unity. The party's theoretical positions need to be scientific (that is, open for debate and discussion), that is, living. Those who differ, either inside our party or outside of it are not, by definition, renegades, traitors, counter-revolutionaries, etc. (Which is not, of course, to say that there are never any renegades or traitors!)

The character and tasks of the SACP should, then, be defined to a large extent by the kind of socialism we hope to build, and by the related perspective we have of the path to that kind of socialism.

But the nature and tasks of the SACP also need to be informed by the character of the class we hope to represent.

### C. The South African Working Class

There has been major restructuring of the South African working class over the last 20 years:

- On the one hand **unemployment** has grown massively. Many workers have all but lost the chance of ever working in the formal wage sector of the economy. There are now some 7 million unemployed in our country.
- On the other hand, those workers who have kept their jobs, and especially unionised workers, have often gained materially from the restructuring. For many, but not all, skills have been upgraded, and there has been a rise in real wages. Faced with the double challenge of economic crisis and the growing power of the union movement, management has adopted the general strategy of retrenching, while upgrading and paying higher wages to a smaller but more skilled workforce.
- At the same time, the employed black working class has itself become more stratified, with growing numbers moving into supervisory, lower white-collar, technical and semi-professional work.

Put another way, the major COSATU (and SACP) working class constituency (typically, semi-skilled industrial black workers) constitutes a strategically critical, but minority stratum of the South African working class. This stratum is flanked by:

- On the one hand, millions more marginalised workers. These include non-unionised unskilled workers; most migrants; rural labourers; those employed in the informal sector; and the millions of unemployed. Together, these millions represent up to 70% of the working class in our country.
- On the other hand, there are clerical workers, artisans, semi-professionals, and the higher level professional and technical workers. In a trend that will continue and even accelerate, there are now increasing numbers of blacks in these categories (although there is still a preponderance of whites).

At the same time the restructuring of the economy has also had a dramatic impact on white workers. Increasing numbers of white workers are unemployed, and in general they are experiencing a major deterioration in their living conditions.

The SACP need to pay close attention to the differences and possible contradictions that can develop within the working and popular masses themselves — between employed and unemployed; between older and younger working people; between “professional”; between industrial workers and others, including those working in the so-called informal sector; between unionised and non-unionised; between urban and rural workers; between male and women workers; and between workers with different cultural backgrounds.

Numerous differences can and do often result in real contradictions and real differences of interest. This underlines the importance of **pluralistic, multi-partite** and **participatory** approach to national democratic and socialist transformation.

At the same time, a major restructuring of our economy and society, built on growth through redistribution, in which priority is given to job creation, housing, health-care, education and infrastructural development, is in the overall interest of all working people in our country. As a party seeking to represent the immediate and longer-term interests of the entire working class, the SACP needs at all times to underline the broader perspective, the overall picture.

**Both** the internal differences within the working class, and the broader unifying interest in major restructuring of our society are **objective** realities. We must not suppress or deny differences, but nor should we allow such differences to overwhelm the broader, unifying project. These points are critical if we are to develop a socialist project around a broad movement centred on the working masses.

#### **Implications for party-building**

The character of the South African working class presents special challenges and difficult organisational strategic choices for the SACP.

In 1990 we took the strategic decision to emphasise the building of our party in the main industrial centres, focussing on organised, industrial workers for recruitment. There were a number of reasons for this choice, including:

- the obvious support we already enjoyed in these quarters;
- the need to strengthen (and transform) the social character of our party, including its leadership, with a major influx of experienced proletarian cadres; and
- the strategic importance of organised, industrial workers”.

In the absence of a detailed party census it is impossible to have a fully accurate picture of how successful this recruitment emphasis has been in practice. But we suggest that the SACP's present geographical strength and its core cadreship is, in fact, largely drawn from this stratum of the working class.

The SACP, however, should seek to represent and defend the entire working class, not least those who are most desperate, those who are most marginalised. How do we best realise this requirement?

The marginalised 70% of the working class is, precisely, very often the most difficult to reach and the most difficult to organise, except perhaps in periodic mobilising drives; or through systematic development work (literacy training, co-operative projects, etc). Industrial workers are partially organised and skilled by the (capitalist) production process itself. But the rural

poor, unemployed youth, rural labourers, etc, are characteristically scattered, disorganised and unskilled.

How then, as a party, do we take up the challenge of work in this area?

If we go for the option of throwing all or most of our resources on organising these marginalised sectors into the SACP, do we risk falling between two stools? We might dissipate our limited resources and lose our core strategic cadreship.

An alternative emphasis would be to use the SACP to stimulate efforts in the direction of the marginalised working class. In other words, the SACP should struggle for an ANC, with all its resources, that is biased in this direction. We should be in the forefront of efforts to empower MDM structures and developmental efforts directed at the marginalised, without seeking to take over or organise these ourselves. We should espouse, as a central component of democratisation, a reconstruction process that addresses the needs of the marginalised.

This is an argument about **emphasis** and about strategic allocation of SACP resources and efforts. We are certainly not arguing that the SACP should have no independent presence amongst the most marginalised strata of the working class. We are not arguing that we should never organise developmental programmes in the rural areas, or that we should never run literacy classes. But these should be seen, perhaps, as pilot projects and example-setters. We are arguing, in other words, for a strategic understanding of how best we serve the interests of all workers in our country, with the particular strengths and the particular limitations of the SACP.

#### **Inner working class differences and anti-democratic projects**

The inner differences and contradictions among the working masses also relate directly to real or potential counter-projects:

- On the one hand, there is the “**liberal**” project (“Low Intensity Democracy” — LID) which seeks to detach organised, skilled and semi-skilled industrial workers from the broader popular masses. This project is connected to big business’s version of a social contract or accord. An elite stratum of industrial workers would have improved work and social conditions in exchange for higher productivity and greater labour peace.

Change in South Africa would benefit a stratum of the working class, at the grave expense of the great majority of the more peripheralised, less skilled, less organised or simply unemployed working class (this is why such a project is sometimes referred to as a 70/30% solution — but 30/70% would be more accurate).

Such a project would hope to stabilise monopoly capital and a new black administrative/state middle stratum would also be drawn into the deal (a campaign for clean and democratic government, now and in the future, no ...be related to this question.) Politically, this would produce a kind of “neo-colonialism of a special type”.

There are some resemblances between this liberal project and democratic dispensations in certain advanced capitalist countries. Without exaggerating or underrating the particular achievements of these dispensations elsewhere, in a country like South Africa, in which there

is a massive “4th ... population, social-democratic-style who hold out very little hope for any e... resolution of our enormous social and economic crisis — apart from the injustice.

- There is also the possibility of a **right-wing**, counter-revolutionary force. The likely active, organisational centres of such a project are fairly obvious reactionary elements from bantustan administrations, the organised neo-fascist and extreme right groups, etc. But for this project to have an enduring potential it would need to have a broad social base as well.

This social base would need to be drawn, amongst other things, from the broader working class. In fact, the target would tend to be largely at other end of the working class from those workers targeted in the “LID”.

In the counter-revolutionary xxx the social base would be sought among the most peripheralised, the most disorganised and desperate — the unemployed, the migrants, anarchistic youth and rural people (here the example of the MNR, and our own local contacts with vigilante forces of all kinds are instructive).

These two anti-democratic projects (the liberal and the ultra-right) underline the need, from our side, for a politics that is neither blind to the real differences within the working class, nor neglects the crucial need for a pluralistic, working class and popular unity. Both the neglect of differences and the neglect of unity building can open up space within the popular masses for “liberal” and right-wing projects.

#### **A new Hegemonic Bloc**

It is in developing a hegemonic project that the working class will best be able to unify itself and counter alternative anti-democratic projects.

In part, this means that the SACP and broader workers’ movement must avoid confining themselves to mere denunciations of the evils of the capitalist system — although such denunciations are, of course, essential. We must also avoid confining ourselves to purely rearguard struggles in defence of workers’ interests — although again, such struggles are important. If, however, the workers’ movement limits itself to denunciation and defence, it risks isolating itself, locking itself into a restricted and unmanoeuvrable position.

The SACP must, with all allied formations, seek to develop the working class in our country as the hegemonic, the leading class. In other words, we seek to develop the working class as a force which is capable of leading our society in every respect, capable of solving the crisis that reaches into every aspect of our society’s fabric — economically, culturally, morally and politically.

Amongst other things this means that, in a situation such as our own, in which the South African capitalist system is in deep crisis, the workers’ movement needs to be, not a factor for dissolution, but the leading force for reconstruction and renewal along lines that open the road for a socialist transformation. We must reject “the worse the better” type notions. Socialist oriented development will not spring from the total collapse of the capitalist economy.

We must intervene in the crisis of capitalism not to rescue capitalism, but in such a way as to develop the leading role of the working class, building around it a bloc of social forces, giving South Africa a new political leadership and initiating a process of profound renewal and transformation.

It is around a major reconstruction process, driven jointly by a national democratic state, the NLM and by a wide range of mass democratic formations, anchored among the broad working masses of our country, that the correct way forward can be charted.

<http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/sacp/1989/central-committee.htm>