



Preparing ourselves for permanent opposition?

A reply to Copelyn and Zikalala by JEREMY CRONIN, who makes the point that: 'This is not an "official" SACP response to Copelyn and Zikalala. The views expressed here coincide, more or less (I would like to believe), with those of many of my Party comrades. But my views are not "the Party line", any more than the views of Copelyn and Zikalala represent some official COSATU or general trade union perspective. The debate is open and it cuts across organisational affiliations. So much the better.'

In the last issue of the *South African Labour Bulletin* (March 1991) John Copelyn ("Collective bargaining: a base for transforming industry") and Snuki Zikalala

("Overlapping leadership in alliance partners") both defend the need for an independent trade union movement in a changing South Africa. They also both

fiercely attack overlapping leaderships ("the wearing of two or more hats") within the ANC/SACP/COSATU alliance.

I agree absolutely with

them that trade union independence is of the greatest importance. Unfortunately, many of their arguments are so weak, they are likely to undermine the very cause they seek to defend.

While there may be some difference of emphasis or outlook between Copelyn and Zikalala, one cannot help noticing the very important points of convergence between them. Perhaps the most basic convergence is the fact that they both approach the issue of overlapping leadership (the 'two hats' debate) with the same fundamental assumptions about wider political issues.

Trade-off at Sun City

Copelyn's article is a revised version of a paper first presented to the Annual Convention of the Institute for Personnel Management at Sun City in October last year. I am not going to argue that trade unionists should never travel to Sun City to speak to Annual Conferences of personnel managers. The real question is: What do they do when they get there?

Copelyn uses the occasion to brief personnel managers about the debate within COSATU on trade union independence, overlapping leaderships with the ANC and SACP, and related issues. He reassures his audience that his own view that "union leadership cannot serve two masters, whether those masters are in alliance or not ... is gaining such ideo-



Jeremy Cronin: 'The debate is open.....so much the better.'

Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin

logical hegemony that I believe it is very likely to grow into the dominant position within the union movement" (p31). But the emphasis is on "very likely" - it is not yet certain.

Why is Copelyn so generously sharing all this information with management? He is using our debate as a point of leverage with them. He is taking it upon himself to sketch the outlines to his Sun City audience of a possible trade-off between unions and management. He is trying to convince personnel managers of the need for national collective bargaining.

Unless there is national collective bargaining, he warns them, unions "will have to focus their attempts on developing close ties with political parties which will give them access to state power" (p32).

In other words, give us national collective bargaining

and do yourselves (and John Copelyn in his own particular ideological battle against the wearing of many hats) a favour. Otherwise, organised workers might start turning even more solidly to the ANC and SACP. If you don't want organised workers spearheading a political challenge for state power, then you had better make some labour relations concessions.

In the old days, communists (and others on the left) too easily used terms like "class collaboration". I will resist that temptation here. But what is certainly true is that Copelyn has a very limiting and disarming conception of political power, and specifically of the state and workers' relation to it.

The working class and state power

Copelyn correctly criticises the fixation, by socialists in the past, on the state as virtually the only instrument "for transforming the quality of life of workers and the oppressed", and he links this fixation to the crisis of East European socialism. I agree with him that it is important, by contrast, to give "a substantially greater role to the independent organisations of civil society - such as trade unions" (p33).

But it does not follow from this that workers should now abandon the contest for state power, or that a weak state is more desirable than a strong, democratic state that is able to carry through its

democratically mandated policies. For Copelyn, however, like Leon Louw, the only issue of concern when it comes to state power is how to limit it. The ideal state for Copelyn is little more than a rubber stamp "enacting in law the agreements reached by organised labour (with bosses) through collective bargaining" (p32).

Totally absent from this incredibly limited and technical conception of the state is any notion that the state organises and defends class power (of course, in complex and often mediated ways). In the long run, in our situation, the state will either continue to operate in the interests of the bosses, or it will become a means for defending and advancing the interests of the working masses.

Copelyn seems not to believe that workers could one day wield democratic state power, and that their state could work *in conjunction with* their independent mass democratic formations to smash the system of wage slavery once and for all. His conception of workers' (and their trade unions') relationship to the state is one of perpetual opposition.

Twice in a decade

Zikalala presents a very similar, but even more shallow view of politics and the state. "According to American sociologists," he tells us, "people get involved in politics once every five years when they cast their vote, or

at times when legislation affecting their lives is being passed" (p45).

That might be a fair description of the highly depoliticised situation prevailing in the United States. (George Bush, for instance, was elected president by a pathetic 23% of potential voters in what was nevertheless described as "a landslide election victory").

But for Zikalala this sad state of affairs *is simply accepted as a model for what normal politics universally is all about!* "...the political struggle is parliamentary where workers go once every five years to vote either ANC, SACP, Nationalist Party or for other political parties" (p45). At least Zikalala is candid. He has an avowedly bourgeois, and a very conservative bourgeois, understanding of politics.

He continues: "In South Africa after we have achieved our goal of non-racial democracy, we have to uplift the living standards of our people. This can only be done by trade unions persuading the employers to use part of the surplus value for the benefit of the workers."

Why *only* trade unions? How about using democratic state power (including an independent and enlightened judiciary) in conjunction with trade unions, consumer bodies, civics, an independent and campaigning progressive press, and a host of other forms of institutional and organised mass pressure?

And, more decisively, how about progressively abolishing wage slavery altogether? That thought is simply unthinkable for Zikalala. Indeed, he compares the supposedly twice only in a decade character of politics with "Worker-employer struggle (which) is permanent". The objective of socialist struggle is not to perpetuate that struggle, but to abolish employers.

Both Copelyn and Zikalala have a limited, entirely negative and permanently oppositionist view of politics and the state. The working class, organised into trade unions, becomes just another lobby.

Political parties and the state bureaucracy

Another and related point of convergence between Copelyn and Zikalala is their failure to distinguish between political parties and state bureaucracy. In this, ironically, they are uncritically repeating one of the great errors of Eastern European socialism.

The present crisis of socialism is linked not only to the collapse of mass democratic movements into the state bureaucracy, but also to a similar conflation of ruling communist parties with the bureaucracy.

According to Zikalala: "A political party...acts through the institutions of the state and local authority. It is involved in parliamentary politics" (p43). This may well be the case. *But this*

does not mean that a political party in power should be indistinguishable from state institutions, or that out of power it should be no more than an electoral machine.

This is a crucial point, and it relates to one of the absolutely central issues of the present South African situation. As we rebuild a mass ANC and a relatively large SACP what are we trying to achieve? Are we simply building launching pads for MPs, or infrastructure for budding state bureaucrats now waiting impatiently in the wings?

The ANC and the SACP that we are building must be formations with strong internal democracy. They should have powerful grass-roots base structures that defend and advance the political and social interests of their members and their broader popular, and in the case of the SACP working class, constituencies.

In or out of power the ANC and SACP should constantly mobilise, campaign and educate - day-to-day, and not just in election periods. They should be fighting formations, not just twice in a decade electoral machines. The party machinery should be independent of state structures, and be prepared to call to account party members in such structures.

There are two crucial reasons why it is absolutely essential not to disarm ourselves with a narrow parliamentary and/or bureaucratic statist understanding of

the role of political parties.

The *first* reason relates to the middle to longer term. The enormous tasks of national democratic and subsequent (we hope) socialist transformation will demand a politically mobilised population. Only a politically mobilised people will be able to ensure that their democratic state has real power. Gains will need to be defended against reactionary forces, and against imperialist intervention. Set-backs and disruptions must not demobilise our people. Nor must our people allow such difficulties to blunt the revolutionary perspectives of their political leadership.

Trade unions and other mass sectoral organisations will play a significant role in these tasks. But, above all, we must ensure that the ANC and SACP are well equipped to provide general political leadership, and that they are powerful democratic forums for their constituencies.

There is, *secondly*, also an immediate reason why we must not allow the SACP and, most especially, the ANC to become simply a bureaucratic government-in-waiting, with the membership little more than future ballot box fodder. If we take that approach, it is not impossible that the ANC-led alliance may lose or demobilise its mass base. In that case it may actually lose, or at least fail to win decisively, the first one-person one-vote election in our country.

We cannot take an electoral victory for granted. But it is precisely this that both Copelyn and Zikalala are doing, as they fixate themselves on preparing the trade unions for opposition to a future ANC government.

We certainly do not want the unions to be a simple labour wing of an ANC (or SACP) government. But the overall working class cause, including the independence and very survival of real trade unionism in our country could be threatened if the new government in a nominally post-apartheid South Africa turns out to be a tripartite alliance, but with a difference - De Klerk, Buthelezi and Anglo American.

Gone would be the worldwide anti-apartheid solidarity from which all our formations, not least the trade unions have benefited. In would come the AFL-CIO and the IMF, no longer restrained by the former isolation of apartheid South Africa. The township wars would be spread strategically into the work-places, and presented in the commercial media and now privatised TV as "ordinary workers opposing left-wing extremists". Bosses would start to deal only with UWUSA "unions".

I think (and fervently hope) this scenario is unlikely. But it is not impossible. We simply cannot take matters for granted. We cannot afford to ignore the enormous success imperialist circles have had in snatching victory from the grasp of



what remain majority supported political movements (Nicaragua and the Philippines are two obvious recent examples).

The imperialists have used a combination of violent destabilisation, economic pressure, and a slickly presented electoral campaign to propel shaky, cobbled-together, reactionary centrist alliances into office in both these cases.

Back to the "two hats" debate

I have chosen to come to this topical question last, against the background of all that I have just said. I have done this deliberately. Part of the problem with this debate is that it is often argued out abstractly, simply in the realm of general principles. Principles are important, but they must be applied to concrete realities.

Can overlapping leaderships, the wearing of two or more hats, compromise the independence of trade unions (or the independence, for that matter, of any other organisation)? Yes, obviously, such overlapping *can* compromise independence on all sides.

There are precautions that can be taken, and the SACP has had extensive experience of these in its alliance with the ANC. Any SACP member serving in an ANC structure, whether as a leader or ordinary member, is, when he or she is operating within that structure, entirely under its democratic discipline. No SACP member should carry a predetermined Party-caucused line into a fraternal organisation, undermining its internal democracy. As a Party we have tried (and perhaps we have sometimes failed) to be very strict and vigilant in these matters.

I am not suggesting that individuals should be schizophrenic. Carrying a caucused line into another organisation in order to pre-empt its own internal democratic processes, is very different from carrying a general outlook and understanding.

Obviously one does not expect SACP leaders serving on the ANC NEC to forget that they had ever heard of Marxism. Clearly the COSATU leaders serving in Party leadership structures bring an important shop-floor understanding and their



own democratic traditions into our ranks. Hopefully, they and their unions benefit in turn from the political and international overview, and decades of experience that some of our Party leaders have acquired.

In short, while in principle, there might be pitfalls with overlapping leaderships; there are also, in principle, enormous positive possibilities of mutual enrichment. How we weigh up the potential pitfalls against the potential advantages should be determined by actual conditions in a given time and place.

It seems to me that the positive possibilities are particularly relevant in our present concrete situation. The ANC and SACP are emerging out of decades of illegality. We are trying to draw together many different strands - exiles, released political prisoners, those emerging from the deep underground, and tens of thousands of militants schooled in the past decade of mass democratic struggle.

Neither the ANC nor the Party belong exclusively to their pre-February 1990