

Some of my thoughts on the 'new UDF'

During preparations for the Anti-War Coalition (AWC) march earlier this year, in the light of discussions focusing quite substantially on the need for us to develop links with COSATU and 'working class issues', I proposed that we make one of our key themes, 'An Injury To One Is An Injury To All'. I thought, at the time, that this was quite a clever way of using an old struggle slogan, coming from COSATU, to highlight the fact that we see our individual struggles as movements making up the AWC, and our united front against the war against Iraq, as part of a common struggle against neoliberalism and capitalism; COSATU is part of this struggle(1) <#_ftn1> . In a banner-making session, I started painting the slogan, with a silhouette of the COSATU logo next to it, onto a piece of yellow fabric. I was joined by a fellow comrade from the APF, who helped me make sure that the logo resembled the original quite closely. We worked from an old COSATU poster and spoke about the problems around prepaid meters that were being faced by members of the APF. With the red and black paint giving the yellow banner a real '80s 'COSATU-feel', the comrade picked up a paintbrush and added to the banner, in green paint, the words 'izinyoka' ('snakes'). Not quite understanding this move, I asked him why he had done this, and explained that it was my understanding that we were trying to show how common our struggles are with COSATU's. He laughed and shook his head, arguing that he saw COSATU as no more than 'izinyoka'. He said something like, "They call us izinyoka when we are reconnecting electricity, but they are really the snakes because they lie to the people telling us we are going to get jobs and free services if we vote for the ANC. But then we are left unemployed and expected to pay for services that we need. How can we say that we are fighting together?"

I smiled then and I smile to myself every time I remember this banner because it speaks so clearly to the fact that it is not self-evident or palpable for the majority of the members of new social movements, like the APF and AEC, that organised labour is a radical and necessary ally in these struggles. In fact, we have to teach comrades in our movements today about the importance of the organised working class for them to be able to even contemplate its importance in their struggles. This is largely because the majority of our members are unemployed people, and, increasingly, younger people who have never worked in their lives. This means that 'a job' and 'a wage' are beginning to feature less and less as the organising principles in the lives of our members, and the possibility of joining a trade union has become really slim(2) <#_ftn2> . At the same time, the entrenchment (and attempted naturalisation) of the logic of commodification in the provision of basic services and health, welfare, education and land reform, has made life (reproduction) the immediate terrain of struggle under neoliberalism, as life has become inserted into the new strategies of accumulation and command. With the majority of our members being forced to struggle for the basic resources necessary for life outside of the comfort of a stable wage or income or social security net, the struggles of COSATU have been far removed and largely irrelevant. As a 'disciplined' member of the Congress Alliance, COSATU has had to accept the non-negotiability of GEAR, and has positioned itself squarely within the policy frameworks that uphold the neoliberal principles embodied in GEAR. There has been no space for any argument, let alone real struggle, against commodification from within COSATU and the Alliance. In fact, the APF emerged partly as a result of the failed attempts of NEHAWU, SASCO and SAMWU to launch sustained campaigns against the introduction of privatisation policies by the ANC government largely as a result of their positioning within the Alliance(3) <#_ftn3> - failed attempts because they were constrained by their allegiance to the Congress tradition to 'be disciplined' in their critiques of the neoliberal macro-economic policies that were to change production in ways that would affect the nature of exploitation and struggle for all. 'Discipline' has meant working within the parameters laid down by GEAR and trying to make small gains for organised labour within a neoliberal framework, with the result that COSATU has increasingly come to celebrate neoliberal changes as victories for the labour movement.

While many of us developed our own critiques of neoliberalism, GEAR and the

Alliance from within Congress structures as 'robust debate' was, at times, permitted, at the end of the day, organisational discipline would rule, and those refusing the insidious policies that would turn life into profits were 'dealt with' in different ways. The APF (and, I would argue, the AEC and CCF) were fruits of our early struggles against this commodification of life - struggles that had no choice but to be antagonistic to the ANC government, and were, therefore, not permitted within Congress structures. For a while, we were dealt with quite easily by members of the Alliance, including COSATU, being called 'undisciplined', 'spoilers', 'the ultra-left', and so on. COSATU and the ANC mobilised the language of the 'National Democratic Revolution' (NDR) and the need for patience in the recognition that the ANC government had inherited a legacy of entrenched inequality and injustice that could not be reversed overnight. South Africans were also asked to accept their responsibilities as citizens of the new democracy, helping the new government to deliver. Even before GEAR, 'Masakhane' would encourage this 'assistance' in the form of the payment for basic services, as multinational companies and the corporate logic moved in to colonise the provision of basic services. For those of us fighting against this logic from within Congress structures in the early 1990s, the flood of Masakhane propaganda that started being sent to branches and locals to be actively distributed by members of Congress structures became a huge problem as it suggested that we were fighting against something that had already been decided on elsewhere. It soon became clear that the shots were indeed being called from elsewhere as the neoliberal imperatives of market-led, export-driven growth came to define all aspects of the programme of our 'new, democratic dispensation'. The strong culture of refusal that came to characterise the struggles of the liberation movement, and, in particular the struggles of non-payment in the townships, now needed to be tamed and their energies directed towards the neoliberal programme of the transition. In this taming, these struggles for 'people's power' came to be represented as a 'culture of entitlement', 'a culture of hand-outs' that needed to be replaced by individual South Africans accepting their responsibilities as citizens of a new democracy in which the logic of payment for basic services is unquestionable. And member organisations of the Alliance would come to play the role of assisting with the acceptance and naturalisation of this logic. In particular, COSATU would come to set the terms for 'good' and 'bad' engagement with the ANC government, painting new social movements as 'counter-revolutionary' and 'bad' for democracy. Around the World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), World Summit On Sustainable Development (WSSD) and the processes of the World Social Forum (WSF), COSATU has played a leading role for the Alliance in trying to stage-manage civil society participation to prevent any blemishing of the ANC government. In spite of its attempts to portray discontent with the ANC government as minimal and restricted to a few 'spoilers', these international spaces have seen the support of new social movements clearly outnumber that of the Alliance, seriously damaging the image of the Congress Movement and 'the miracle' of South Africa. COSATU could no longer deny the significance of the role that the new movements were playing. However, it would not make any attempts to begin working with these movements on issues that were common to both its members and those of new social movements. Instead, a staging of critique and 'constructive engagement' with the state around those areas being taken up by new movements would ensue e.g. the campaign around the Basic Income Grant (BIG) is clearly a coming together of those movements considered 'good' and 'disciplined' by the Alliance to put forward a solution that is workable within the existing macro-economic framework, and that brings South Africans together as 'good citizens' in a campaign to allow them access to the very minimal resources necessary for them to become productive i.e. working and paying individuals. This, as opposed to a campaign that refuses the logic of payment and commodification by refusing to pay for water and electricity. COSATU has time and time again been invited to meetings of the APF and the Coalition Against Water Privatisation to work together in campaigns fighting the various forms of privatisation facing all our members. These have been in vain.

Even in the instances where COSATU affiliates (e.g. SAMWU) have been directly affected by the same policies affecting affiliates of the APF, the Alliance has worked to prevent any meaningful and lasting relationships between these movements from congealing. Worse, COSATU has often played the

role of intervening to prevent its own affiliates from addressing the real effects of neoliberalism on its own members through their working together with members of community organisations or groups openly antagonistic to the ANC government. A striking example here is the way in which COSATU and CEPPWAWU leadership 'handled' the regional initiative within CEPPWAWU to hold a referendum on COSATU's position on the Alliance as well as its initiatives to deal with the problems of its members who had lost their jobs. This has led to the formation of an independent union, GIWUSA, COSATU clearly failing to address the changed conditions of production affecting the lives of their members in new ways. COSATU has, in fact, made clear policy choices not to focus on the new forms of work and the new conditions facing workers under neoliberalism, prioritising the organisational form of the large industrial union and the interests of the formal sector worker. In spite of its own experience of membership losses due to retrenchments and its acknowledgements that neoliberalism has inaugurated changes in the forms of work that tend to move away from the factory as the primary site of production, COSATU has chosen not to address its ways of organising or the sectors in which it organises so that the informal economy and more flexible forms of work come to shape its policy decisions. This has meant that COSATU has not offered and does not offer any significance or real point of reference for people struggling in communities over the conditions of life whose struggle today is not mediated by the comfort of a regular wage.

However, its point of contact with these new subjectivities of the social production characteristic of neoliberalism continues to be that of the wage, as 'the right to work' features in a common vocabulary used by both old and new social movements in their imagination of a solution to the problems faced today. This is an extremely significant point that must be considered in the debate that is emerging about the 'new UDF', and, in particular, in understanding why it has appeared now.

Emerging to take up the real problems of communities (and workers increasingly being failed by their trade unions), new social movements speak the old language and imagination of struggle that characterised the spirit of refusal of the liberation movement. This language and imagination reasserts commitments to free basic services and denies the claim that there is no alternative to commodification. Characteristic of campaigns is the refusal of the logic of payment for services through the active reconnection of water and electricity supply lines and the destruction of prepaid meters. In addition, many of our members and affiliates have come together to deal with the crisis of unemployment and the effects of the changes in the forms of work available in various ways. Outside of the comfort of a wage, our demands have often gone beyond the call for jobs, opening up real possibilities for the imagining and constitution of real alternatives to capitalism in the here and now. This is significant also for the reason that these demands have arisen in the context of changes in the sphere of production and an increase in the unpaid, reproductive labour shouldered by the individual. More often than not, however, the old lefts within our movements have not allowed us to get carried away with ourselves, reigning us back to where the 'real struggle' lies, with 'the only true revolutionary subject of history, the industrial worker'. This has meant that within the APF, for example, we have not given enough time or thought to the new ways in which our own unemployed members and workers who are retrenched, let down by their unions and join us, are organising themselves differently from COSATU, or how our members are living without access to a stable wage. Instead, we have fixated on our need to 'win over' the 'rank and file' of COSATU. And there is always the insistence from some groups within the APF that we should submit our own programmes to that of COSATU's. This has meant that we have largely neglected the impulses that exist amongst ourselves for life that challenges and subverts the constraining frameworks of neoliberalism. For some groups within the APF, this approach has also meant seeing capitalist work as the solution to the problems faced by the working class.

My comrade's painting of 'izinyoka' on the banner speaks to the fact that the continued celebration of the industrial worker organised in a trade union as the only revolutionary subject in the world is what today prevents our movements from engaging with the even 'newer' struggles that have

emerged in recent months around 'service delivery'. In making COSATU and organised industrial labour our focus, we completely miss the new subjectivities and possibilities opened up by the changes in production/reproduction that characterise neoliberalism - subjectivities that are increasingly not able to be disciplined by the constraining frameworks of the Alliance and corporate governance.

It is in this context that the 'new UDF' emerges today - to again try to contain and dilute any real critique or possible subversion of the programme of the ANC government, this time from within the Alliance. If we look more closely at the recent uprisings in townships across the country that have been labelled 'service delivery riots' and 'spontaneous', I think that we could safely argue that a significant number of these protests were well organised outbursts from groups of people within the fold of the ANC. In my own experience, visiting the Kennedy Road informal settlement in Durban, the site of one of these uprisings, was important. Having grown up in the neighbourhood of Kennedy Road and cut my political teeth in the ANC and ANCYL branches of Western Areas, the branch to which members of the Kennedy Road settlement had belonged in the past, I was eager to see how this community was finally taking on the ANC branch in the area. I was surprised to discover, in conversation with the comrades involved, that the Kennedy Road struggles had been initiated by members of that ANC branch. In fact, one of the leaders of these actions was a serving member of the Branch Executive Committee. It was clear, however, that these comrades had a cynical and clearly defined attitude towards the local ANC branch, seeing the need to fight the local ANC Councillor despite being ANC members. For them, given their position as a marginalised community within a broader community and the limited resources available to them, it was a strategic choice to remain within the ANC and fight their battles. Comrades pointed out how access to basic services through the local indigent policy and state grants was controlled by ANC members who often demanded membership of the ANC in return for their processing applications, and so on. ANC membership has, therefore, become a necessity to secure those services necessary for life. However, the recent 'service delivery riots' have shown that even ANC membership is no longer sufficient to secure a quality life under neoliberalism. In these 'service delivery' struggles, then, it would seem that it has become more difficult to wield organisational discipline against critique and dissent as the policies of the ANC Alliance begin to fail its own members. With such massive protests coming from within the Alliance, and outside of COSATU, or any institutionally controllable space or entity, the need for a 'new UDF' has become necessary - to provide the spaces within the Alliance for capture of these new and radical subjectivities that are produced outside of the traditional frameworks and approaches.

And this is what we miss when we argue that new social movements should be joining this 'new UDF' in the hope that it will force COSATU's split from the Alliance. As organisational discipline begins to fail to provide the means for the silencing of dissent within the Alliance, new forms of control emerge on the plane of life, and this is where the struggle over the meanings of the possibilities for life become important in the discussion about the relationship between new social movements and COSATU. While the few written accounts of its launch that I have seen celebrate the event as a coming together of variously affected members of trade unions and communities with the potential for something new, the one photograph that I saw in the Star showed a hall packed with people carrying the same mass produced placard saying 'The Right To Work'. This alone, to me, suggests that the programme of such an animal can only be to re-harness the energies of those involved in the struggles against the commodification of life towards the disciplining parameters for life set out by the notion of work and the wage under capitalism. In a context of declining wage labour and social welfare, 'the right to work' becomes a means of preventing any radical project from emerging through the recasting of new subjectivities in old moulds of the age of industrial production. In joining a 'new UDF' that seeks to effect change in neoliberal South Africa through a demand for jobs and the right to work we deny the radical potentialities presented in our struggles that exist in the spaces outside of wage labour and capitalist work. Instead, we need to be providing alternatives to these old songs of the Alliance that celebrate the subjectivity of the industrial working class

as the true revolutionary subject of capitalism.

These alternatives cannot seek to provide one other more radical subjectivity to lead us out of neoliberalism or try to reassert or rescue the industrial worker from its decline under neoliberalism, but must celebrate the birth of many radical subjectivities in these times, whose co-existence in many singular struggles that have a common enemy yet multiple strategies, at times, coalesce and at other times exist independently of each other. In making connections with these subjectivities and struggles, we need also to acknowledge that this new terrain of struggle under neoliberalism exists in the context of widespread acceptance of and, indeed, faith in representative democracy and the state to deliver, with the right to work framing the demands of many of those involved in these struggles. (When I met with comrades in Kennedy Road, it was around a table draped in a South African flag.) With life becoming the terrain of struggle for many today, institutions such as COSATU, the ANC, and even the APF and other new social movements come to offer different options for individuals in this struggle. We need to offer more than the promise of jobs and a better life under neoliberalism. We need to highlight the impossibility of the 'new UDF' delivering jobs and incomes to pay for services under neoliberalism, and to point to the potentials opened up beyond the wage and market relations for the constitution of new relations subversive to capitalism. It is inevitable that more COSATU and ANC members will begin to feel the effects of GEAR as they lose their jobs or experience wage cuts or have their water and lights cut off for non-payment. As this happens, our primary role should be to challenge the 'new UDF' as an answer to these problems by showing the futility of a struggle for jobs and the logic of commodification. This can only be done if we all let go of the notion that the revolutionary industrial working class will rise once again, as well as the belief that there is a uniform subject waiting to be formed through the intervention of a revolutionary vanguard in the struggles that are currently being waged in communities. Instead we need to celebrate the production of multiple singularities subversive to neoliberalism in multiple ways that cannot be neatly fitted into categories that seek to homogenise experiences of capitalism and struggles against it.

(1) <#_ftnref1> This position must be understood strategically within the context of the debates happening at the time in the AWC, often times dominated by Socialist tendencies reducing a relationship to and understanding of 'the working class' to organised labour involved primarily in industrial production.

(2) <#_ftnref2> This does not mean that the wage and the need to find employment do not continue to feature as the signifiers of change and 'a better life' in the minds of the majority. However, neoliberalism brings about profound changes in the forms of work and the kinds of incomes accessible to the majority of people that offer up new possibilities for imagining life differently i.e. outside of the boundaries of work and the wage.

(3) <#_ftnref3> Ahmed and I have made this argument in much greater detail in a research paper entitled 'Remembering Movements: The Trade Union Movement & New Social Movements in Neoliberal SA', where we also show how COSATU has come to function within the Alliance to set and frame (and so limit) the parameters of debate and critique within the Congress Alliance, playing the role of critic and 'watchdog' within the Alliance but not holding much sway in the decisions that are finally taken on major issues.