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South Africa

Resistance to neoliberalism

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The victory of the African National Congress (ANC) in the democratic elections of 1994 marked the end of apartheid in South Africa, after a long period of negotiations between the forces of the regime and the liberation movement, initiated in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These culminated in an agreed model of transition whose strategic perspective had been established in the camp of the liberation movement in a clear form in 1990 with the formation of the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) which was well integrated into the former, and the main trade union confederation of the country, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

The ANC came to power with a neo-Keynesian program, the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) whose initial implementation was very partial, but which was abandoned two years to later in favour of the Growth Employment and Redistribution Strategy (GEAR), a program of neoliberal aspect.

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The adoption of GEAR was accompanied by the promotion of a regional sub-imperialist project based on a neoliberal agenda of rapid economic integration of the African continent and its insertion in the global economy, through the New Partnership for Africa' s Development (NEPAD, Bond, 2004).

The objective of the ANC government is to consolidate a new dominant historic bloc based on capital oriented to large-scale export, the promotion of a "black bourgeoisie", and the inclusion in a subordinate form of the middle layers and sectors of the working-class (Dessai, 2004).

The social consequences of GEAR have been very drastic for the popular sectors: increased unemployment, rising from 16% in 1990 to more than 40% in recent years; a fall in the average income of working class families of around 19%, in particular in those sectors linked to the informal economy, around 50% of the economically active population; a strong polarization of the distribution of wealth and income; an increase in poverty, with the official rate at 70% and of extreme poverty, estimated at 28%; an increase in the price of basic public services, like water or electric lighting, due to privatisation and the policies of "cost recovery", that have caused massive cuts in supply to some 10 million families for not having paid bills, and maintenance of the structure of land ownership which has undergone very few alterations with respect to the period of apartheid (McKinley, 2004).

These processes of increased inequality have been accompanied by the emergence of a small "new black middle-class" with its own specific interests. By this conjuncture of elements, the evolution of South African society has been defined as a transition from racial apartheid to class apartheid (Bond, 2004).

From the 1970s to the end of the 1980s, South Africa was characterized by a mighty workers' movement, formed in the heat of the processes of industrialization of the 1950s and 1960s that led to the formation of a significant industrial working class. Between 1950 and 1980 the number of black workers in manufacturing industry rose from 360,000 to 1,103,000, and in mining from 450,000 to 768,000 (Bond, Miller, and Ruiters, 2000).

The strikes in Durban in 1973 marked the birth of a new combative trade union movement. As Jacquin explains (1999), several currents with different union projects emerged within this movement:

A first current inked to the ANC; a second linked to the Black Consciousness Movement inspired by Steve Biko; and

a third, formed by independent Marxist trade union cadres, who constituted what Jacquin calls the "trade union left", and which was involved in setting up the main industrial unions of the country, whose culmination was the formation of FOSATU in 1979.

The trade union left initially embodied an independent project with respect to the ANC and, from the 1980s onwards, a part of its nucleus considered the possibility of impelling its own political project, with the formation of a "Workers' Party", inspired more or less by the Brazilian model and disputing the political hegemony of the ANC and the SACP. But gradually this project was abandoned and the political leadership of the ANC and its hegemony within the union movement was accepted, with the SACP in a stronger position at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, on the eve of the negotiations for the transition towards a post-apartheid society.

A road without return?

The first part of the 1980s was marked by debates and negotiations between the various union sectors for the formation of a single unitary confederation, which would culminate with the setting up of COSATU in 1985, integrating the broad majority of unions in the country. Different orientations coexisted from the beginning, but progressively those linked to the ANC acquired a hegemonic position and the old "union left" fragmented and adapted. COSATU developed a very significant role within the fight against apartheid, although its relations with other pillars of the liberation movement, the neighbourhood and civic groups rooted in the townships and poor districts, were always an element of controversy.

The militancy and combativeness of the trades unionism incarnated by COSATU made it an organization which was admired internationally. Along with the formation of the Brazilian CUT in 1983, and the eruption of independent trades unionism in South Korea in 1986-87 (which would culminate with the creation of the KCTU in 1995), the constitution of COSATU was one of the best examples of development of a model of combative trades unionism in the countries of the semi-periphery, in a context of an international ebbing of workers' movements, the zenith of neoliberalism, and progressive adaptation of the first to the second.

In 1990, COSATU formally joined the tripartite Alliance with the ANC and SACP and from 1994 it maintained a subordinate relationship with the ANC government. From 1994 the trade union model of COSATU, and its members, experienced a progressive transformation towards a unionism of more institutionalised agreements, less militant, and lacking a horizon of socialist transformation.

This involved changes in its organizational culture, a greater bureaucratisation, and the cooption of important union leaders in positions of responsibility in the government, and also of middle cadres at company level in departments of human resources (Jensen, 2004)COSATU was affected by neoliberal policies and unemployment, and it has suffered a significant fall in affiliation.

In 1996 COSATU unions had 1.9 million affiliated members, whereas in 2005 the number was 1.7 million. In fact from 1996 500,000 affiliates were lost, although they gained 300,000, the majority due to the entrance of new unions into the confederation, like DENOSA or SASBO, of conservative tradition. The profile of membership also experienced significant evolution with a growing greater weight of qualified and "white collar" workers to the detriment of semi-skilled and "blue collar" workers.
Faced with the application of GEAR, the strategy of COSATU has been simultaneously to maintain its subordinate Alliance with the ANC and at the same time to express its disagreement with its policies.

The confederation has oscillated between mere verbal opposition to governmental policies without any real strategy

of confrontation with them, and the organization of important punctual mobilizations, among them several general strikes. Within the confederation, the most combative sector has been the union of municipal workers, SAMWU, protagonist of important struggles against privatisation.

There is no organized union left current, but the negative effects of neoliberalism on COSATU's base places it in a situation of permanent structural tension. As indicated by Trevor Ngwane (2003), there is reason to believe that the accumulated malaise will lead to a greater union combativeness since "the leadership of COSATU has captured the bodies of the workers, but not their souls"

The emergent resistance

The impact of neoliberal policies led to the emergence, from the end of the 1990s, of increasing social resistance that experienced a period of rapid growth from 2000 to 2003, although it later contracted partially. This must be considered not only as a result of the increase in poverty but as a direct response to the policies of the government (Dessai, 2004), in particular against the policies of privatisation of basic services like water or electric lighting, which constituted a central mechanism in what Harvey (2004) calls "accumulation by dispossession".

This "neoliberal dispossession" is added to the "historical dispossession" caused by apartheid and its legacy.
 The social base of these movements (habitually referred to in South Africa as "new social movements", in a usage of the term different to that used by "European theory" in relation to new social movements) is formed by the most impoverished sectors of South African society, the inhabitants of the townships, the local communities and the most stricken urban areas affected by massive unemployment, an extraordinary s housing crisis and lack of services. A good part of the social base of these struggles is formed by the unemployed, although they have not developed a collective identity as unemployed in the style of the Argentine piqueteros, and women also play a significant role.

Many analysts, like Dessai (2003) have talked about the protagonists of these movements in terms of the "poor", a vague and loosely defined category but also one used by the movements themselves, and that includes in this amalgam of marginalized sectors that sustain them (Dwyer, 2003). Dessai (2004) makes a comparison with the struggles of the "urban crowd" at the beginning of industrialization, analysed by authors like Hobsbawm, as loosely structured and inconstant movements of the urban poor for economic change.

We can conceive of them as reactive and defensive movements for daily survival carried out by what Davis (2005) calls the "urban informal proletariat" of the hyper-degraded peripheries of the great cities of the South, whose way of life is "informal survivalism". Their characteristics reflect the transformations undergone by the working-class and the impact of the processes of "urbanization disconnected from industrialization" that according to Davis is distinctive of the present dynamic of capitalism (except in China) and that fits well with South African reality.

A number of campaigns and organizations have emerged. Among the most important are the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), set up in 1998 around the demand for access to drugs for carriers of the HIV virus, a movement with a large social base and a formalized organizational national structure.

It has acted as a "single issue" campaign, focused against the pharmaceutical multinationals and avoiding confrontation with the ANC government; the Anti-Privatization Forum (APF), essentially based in Johannesburg, set up in 2000 as point of contact between several organizations, most importantly the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC).

The SECC was set up as a riposte to the increase in the cost of electric lighting after privatisation, organising the famous Operation Khanyisa of illegal reconnection of supplies to families who had been disconnected because of non-payment; the Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), created in 2001 in the region of Cape Town as a response to the increasing evacuations of families for non-payment of mortgages or rents; and the Landless People' s Movement (LPM), formed in June 2001, because of the extreme slowness of the agrarian reform. Its base is formed by an amalgam of sectors ("landless", small farmers, rural poor and so on) and its self-definition as "landless" expresses the demands for justice of the impoverished rural sectors. It is inspired by the Brazilian MST but has neither its force nor its global significance (Greenberg, 2004).

These different movements have had a fragmentary existence and little mutual coordination. Nevertheless, they participated jointly in the mobilizations for the UN World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) in Durban in 2001 under the umbrella of the Durban Social Forum (DSF) and, later, during the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002, within the framework of the Social Movement Indaba (SMI) coalition.

The latter later became permanent as a national coordination, although weak and superstructural, of the movements. Johannesburg was testimony to the strong division between the social movements, whose demonstration mobilized 20,000 people, and the forces of the governmental Alliance who in their own march mobilized only 5,000. Both counter-summits were also the occasion to symbolically insert the struggles against neoliberalism in South Africa in the international cycle post-Seattle.

This resistance has emerged as periodic movements on the basis of concrete defensive demands directed fundamentally against the local administration, ordered to implement the policies of privatisation (Dessai and Pithouse, 2003). They have unfolded a broad spectrum of strategies, including a "repertoire" of actions like: legal processes, demonstrations, public occupations of offices, illegal reconnection of services that have been cut off, physical blocking of the evacuations of houses, and confrontations with the police (McKinley and Naidoo 2004).

Its organizational structure is variable in terms off organizational formalization and geographic scope. The number of people effectively organized, beyond punctual mobilizations, is relatively weak. It is possible to consider that they are movements that do not have a mass base, but a mass orientation (Ngwane, 2003).

Politically, this resistance to neoliberalism has emerged outside of the forces of the Alliance bloc and the historic forces that headed the fight against the apartheid. They were created outside the "politics of the transition" but they operate on the political terrain (McKinley, 2004) and fill, albeit in a very partial form, the vacuum left by the neoliberal turn and the institutionalisation of the traditional forces of the working-class (Ngwane, 2003), in a context however of lack of political alternative to the ANC and the SACP and the great weakness of the socialist left.

Relations with the forces of the Alliance, and the ANC itself, has been in general very conflictual, although the type of concrete relationship is variable and goes from open confrontation, as is the case of the APF and the AEC, to tense relations, as is the case of the LPM which has members of the ANC and SACP inside it, and the search for agreement, as is the case of the TAC that has tried to win the support of the government in the face of the multinationals (Benjamin, 2004).

Challenges and perspectives

After their unstoppable growth between 2000 and 2003, the social movements experienced a certain ebb tide and several difficulties as facing simultaneously strong state repression and attempts at cooption; while maintaining concrete struggles; continue developing after having obtained some initial basic successes; translate their mobilizing

force into stable organizational consolidation; advance medium and long term strategic perspectives, and, in particular, extend their organized social base and establish alliances with other social sectors, beyond the "poor" and the unemployed, as well as students and the organized working-class.

For this reason, the relationship between these movements and COSATU is a central strategic element. Globally, this is tense and distant. COSATU is identified by the movements as part of the governmental bloc, and the movements are described as "ultra-leftist" bye COSATU, which fears their anti-ANC approach. Against this background, it seems reasonable on the part of the social movements to look for bridges with the unions, without losing the capacity for their own initiative, through concrete agreements for unity of action, so dragging significant sectors outside the camp of the Alliance (AIDC, 2004). The strengthening of this social resistance must be accompanied also by attempts to construct a political alternative to the ANC and the SACP, a process that, given the weakness of the socialist left, will take time.

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