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South Africa:

The Left and South Africa's Crisis

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Brian Ashley is the editor of the South African journal AMANDLA! He was interviewed for Against the Current by David Finkel and Dianne Feeley.

Against the Current: Please tell us about the magazine Amandla! â€” what's your orientation and perspective, and what's your audience in the overall framework of the South African left?

Brian Ashley: Amandla! was initiated in 2006 as the crisis in the country was deepening, as neoliberal policies exacerbated the divisions of apartheid and as the crisis in the African National Congress (ANC, the governing party â€” ed.) and its alliance partners (South African Communist Party and trade union federation COSATU) deepened. It initially drew the active involvement of leftists inside and outside the ANC Alliance, although those of us outside the Alliance led the initiative.

The idea was to establish a open forum on the left and to facilitate a non-sectarian discussion on left strategy given the crises (social and economic) in the country and the popular upsurges that were unfolding in poor communities, in view of the failure of the state to deliver basic and essential services and given worker struggles against job losses and privatization.

However, the left in the Alliance essentially liquidated itself into one faction of the ANC led by then deputy president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, who is now president of the country. Having seemingly won the struggle for hegemony in the ANC, the ANC left saw less need to relate to left forces outside the ANC Alliance. Differences within the Amandla! Collective occurred as a result and were sharpened by a growing shift to authoritarianism and intolerance by the Zuma-led ANC.

Key initiators of the Amandla! project were expelled from the SACP for their critique of the view that the Zuma leadership represented a shift to the left. In this context Amandla! shifted perspective towards promoting alternative left strategies and to supporting processes aimed at building independent working-class struggles and initiatives.

ATC: The African National Congress has obviously been the dominant political party since the fall of apartheid. Is its trajectory along the lines of European social-democratic parties that have turned “social-neoliberal”? Or is it more complicated? What are the contending forces within it, and the state of the “tripartite alliance” with the trade union federation COSATU and South African Communist Party?

BA: The ANC is a broad nationalist movement in which different political and ideological currents have been at play. There have always been bourgeois but mainly petty bourgeois forces that played a dominant role in the organization. The SACP and the ANC's alliance with trade union movements has ensured a strong working-class influence, which became greater during the popular upsurges of the 1980s.

However, after winning political freedom in 1994 and as a result of the indigenization of the public service and the policy of Black Economic Empowerment, bourgeois nationalist and petty bourgeois forces have predominantly shaped the ANC's direction.

Many ANC leaders are now major investors in the finance, mining, telecommunications, armaments, fishing, agriculture and a host of other industries. They use their political position in the ANC and in the state to leverage lucrative deals whereby they become, almost overnight, dollar millionaires.

In accounting for the ANC's failure to redistribute wealth and its implementation of neoliberal policies, one should not lose sight of the impact that the changed international balance of forces has had following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the advent of globalization. Nevertheless, the key explanation for SA's neoliberal transition lies in the power of South African capital and in the ANC's initial reluctance to confront capital and redirect its wealth through taxation, enforced investment programs and even nationalization to overcome the legacy of apartheid and underdevelopment.

Instead there is gradual co-optation by big business through Black Economic Empowerment programs where politically connected pro-black business interests become junior partners of big business in unbundling and restructuring deals.

ATC: Jacob Zuma ostensibly represents the ANC's "left" at least rhetorically. Has his government dealt with the economic and social conditions of the black majority "and how would you characterize the economy and levels of inequality in SA presently?"

BA: It was a major tragedy for the left when COSATU and the SACP and other left forces in the ANC, desperate for an alternative to the neoliberal policies pursued by the AIDS denialist Thabo Mbeki regime, rallied around Jacob Zuma and helped get him elected President of the ANC and subsequently the country. Zuma is a consummate politician who has consolidated support by simultaneously putting himself forward as a man of the left while taking on the mantle of Zulu nationalism from the Inkatha Freedom Party.

There is nothing left about him. At a personal level he is a homophobe, misogynist and polygamist. His administration continues with neoliberal economic policies, pursuing such policies as monetarism, inflation targeting and labor flexibility. This explains the increased alienation of COSATU from the regime that it helped put in power. The most recent indication of the rupture between the Zuma's government and COSATU was the massive 12 March 2012 general strike led by COSATU, against the tolling of Johannesburg's motorways and the failure of the government to ban labor contractors.

Two worlds separate township and suburban life, and an even greater divide separates life in the former Bantustans from the major metropolitan cities. Our country faces extreme difficulties in dealing with mass unemployment and poverty. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is still devastating in its spread and impact, even if the age of AIDS denial is over. Nor can we stay aloof from the crises of our education, health, water and housing systems. As a result crime and violence continues to shake our society and numb our senses.

Unequal Society, Declining Economy

Mass unemployment and poverty wages lie at the center of the social crises our people face. More than a quarter of the work force is unemployed. When those workers who have given up looking for work are taken into account, the rate of unemployment is a massive 40% of the total work force. According to government Minister Trevor Manuel's National Planning Commission, more than one third of all workers earn less than \$120 a month, while half the work force earn less than \$300.

Underpinning this social crisis is the decline of the South African economy. South Africa recently joined the BRICS, a grouping of leading emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India and China. The irony is that while SA's economy dominates the region and the wider African continent, it can be considered a declining as opposed to a rising economy.

This is essentially as a result of the exhaustion of the apartheid mineral and energy growth model and the failure, after the end of apartheid, to diversify the economy into new growth sectors. The opening up of the South African economy failed to attract the foreign investment that was hoped to stimulate sustained growth in the productive, job-creating sectors.

At the heart of South Africa's decline are three interrelated factors, namely SA's declining resource base, weak internal markets and demand for consumer goods, and a policy framework that has encouraged an open and externally oriented economy that facilitates financialization and capital flight.

While the post-apartheid literature has focused on both the structural weaknesses of the South African economy and the neoliberal policy framework as barriers to sustained development, less attention has been centered on SA's declining resource base.

In South Africa there is a common pattern of resource depletion across a wide range of key resource sectors, such as energy, minerals (for example coal reserve estimates have been revised downwards to just one fifth of original estimates), water (by 2004, 98% of the total water resource had already been allocated), and soil fertility (land degradation has already occurred on 41% of cultivated land).

Even South Africa's biodiversity and environmental infrastructure are under extreme stress from industrial processes and climate change. The resource depletion of these key sectors will have an adverse effect on South African exports and drive up the input costs of locally produced goods further undermining the economy. Unless economic growth is decoupled from rising rates of resource use and negative environmental impacts, economic development will suffer with negative consequences for society and the environment.

Against the background of the global crisis, South Africa's vulnerability to external shocks from the global economy have been successively demonstrated through currency crashes, capital flight, export declines and massive job losses. During the Great Recession of 2008-2009 alone, a million jobs were lost.

All of this has contributed to making SA one of, if not the most unequal country in the world. Measured by the Gini co-efficient SA has a 0.73 measure, where one represents absolute income inequality. [This is a statistical measure of how much income is concentrated at top layers. By comparison, in the United States, the most unequal of major industrial economies, the Gini coefficient is between 0.46 and 0.47 ed.]

The almost doubling of the rate of unemployment since the end of apartheid is a major reason for the rise in inequality. Seventy percent of the unemployed are under 35 years of age and more than 60% of the unemployed are women.

Women in the rural areas, especially the former Bantustan areas, are the most affected by unemployment and poverty especially because of the government's failure to redistribute land. Of the 30% target for land redistribution by 2014, less than 7% has been placed in the hands of black people. Much of this land is not being farmed productively due to the failure of government to support communities with inputs and agricultural extension services.

Inequality is also represented in the unequal access to water, electricity, sanitation, housing, education and health services. This has led to a wave of militant service delivery protests, which has made SA the country with the highest incidents of protests per capita in the world. [See an account by Zachary Levenson in this issue.]

Toward an Alternative

ATC: What is the Democratic Left Front, and to what extent is it “or can it become” an alternative force? What are its strategic priorities and its level of support within the working class?

BA: The Democratic Left Front (DLF) is an anti-capitalist political united front of social movements, trade unions, community organizations and political currents which was formally launched in January 2011. It has structures in most of SA's nine provinces and although it did not participate in the 2011 local government elections has 20 elected councillors working with it through affiliated organizations.

Its main strategic priority is to link and bring solidarity to the thousands of grassroots struggles that have erupted around the country in view of the government's failure to provide basic and essential services to poor people. In the face of mass unemployment (40% when discouraged workers are included) and a huge housing backlog of more than two million units, the DLF has launched a campaign that brings these two issues together. We call for a massive housing program that can stimulate downstream industries and create millions of jobs in construction, plumbing, carpentry, etc.

Given the DLF's orientation to eco-socialism we support the campaign for “One Million Climate Jobs,” which are understood as jobs that bring down the emission of greenhouse gasses (GHG) that is leading to runaway climate change. Since SA is the 12th biggest emitter of GHGs in the world it is urgent that we switch to renewable energy (mainly solar and wind), build a decent public transport system (thereby take polluting trucks and cars off the roads), retrofit building to be energy efficient, and shift our agriculture from industrial to small-scale organic agriculture.

In this way millions of climate jobs can be created and reorient our economy away from the current extraction-based one, toward a more diversified industrial economy addressing the most urgent needs of our people. It is in this way that climate change can be brought to the attention of working people on any mass level. Otherwise climate change is too remote in time and space and is drowned out by immediate crises of housing, education, health and of course decent work.

The DLF is growing into a significant force, especially in Gauteng, the heartland of SA's working class. However, we see it as important to relate to COSATU, the dominant mass trade union movement in the country, which is currently in alliance with the ANC and the SACP. We believe as tensions increases in the ANC Alliance the possibility for an even broader regroupment with the left of COSATU and other social movements will be the basis for a mass political alternative to the ANC.

Since this development remains some few years from being realized, it is important to build the DLF in current struggles and fill the vacuum on the left, especially since the SACP has liquidated itself into the ANC and ceased to act as an independent force that mobilizes working-class communities.

ATC: Cape Town is the only major city ruled by the Democratic Alliance (the liberal opposition party) and the Cape is the only area where people not classified “black” in the former color lines under apartheid “Coloreds,” Indians and whites “are the majority. We understand that many blacks (not just supporters of the ANC) see this as a problem. How true are those sentiments? What is the social composition of the Democratic Alliance? Are DA's black supporters mainly from the professional and wealthy classes? Is it a serious threat to the ANC in the longer term?

BA: The majority of people in Cape Town and the Province of the Western Cape are what was termed “Coloured” by the apartheid regime. It is necessary to bear in mind that under apartheid Cape Town was also treated as a

“Coloured labour preferential region.” This meant that migration by so-called Africans from the Bantustans was highly restricted. This explains its peculiar demographics.

Furthermore, from a historical perspective one has to understand that Cape Town is the oldest city of South Africa and was home of several waves of colonialism (Dutch, British) as well as home to the first African and Malaysian slaves.

Cape Town has a rich history of resistance, trade unionism and militant struggles. So-called “Coloured” people played a leading role in the anti-apartheid and anti-capitalist movement in the Western Cape. However, the role and contribution of this section of the oppressed people were not fully integrated in the post-apartheid assertion of African Nationalism. African nationalism defined itself too narrowly to integrate and give so-called Coloured people a sense of being part of the Nation-in-construction.

Since this section of the population was slightly better off in terms of wages, housing and living standards, affirmative action and the indigenization of the state after the fall of apartheid led to fears that “Coloured” people would lose out to “Africans.” This heightened processes of polarization and the weakening of a common black identity (as pursued during the liberation struggle) and fueled sentiments of a separate identity.

Little has been done to overcome the legacy of spatial apartheid, separate development and other barriers (language, education, sports). People from the “Coloured” community continue to live in the same townships and their children attend the same schools as they did under apartheid.

These conditions fueled the flames of insecurities and fears in working-class communities as they experienced the brunt of neoliberal policies: massive shrinkage of public sector jobs in municipal services, education, health and the service sector generally. Mass unemployment and deprivation in many “Coloured” townships have given rise to a deep level of alienation from the society, particularly among the youth.

This has fueled very high levels of gangsterism, crime and substance abuse that resemble some areas of the Afro-American ghettos. It is largely based on the insecurities flowing from this situation, as well as the phenomena of mass unemployment, that alienated the “Coloured” vote from the ANC. However, the Democratic Alliance (DA) only gained this constituency through a series of mergers with smaller parties such as the Independent Democrats and the former National Party (old apartheid party).

The DA’s core constituency remains middle class whites. However, as people are made more desperate by rising unemployment and the failure of government to provide basic services together with increasing corruption, the DA, as the main opposition party, is making some inroads into the black townships.

It is likely in the next election that an alliance of smaller parties, including the breakaway from the ANC at the time of the toppling of Mbeki, the Congress of the People (COPE), will form an electoral alliance with the DA and thereafter merge. In this way the DA could get greater support in some African townships. Nevertheless, black middle classes support mainly the ANC and are mobilized through a chauvinistic African nationalism.

ATC: How do you in South Africa view the spectacle of U.S. politics from a distance?

BA: Well, we are very impressed with the emergence of the Occupy Movement as the movement of the 99% as opposed to the 1% elite that dominates all aspects of life in the USA. Its emergence as Occupy Wall Street was inspiring and created great excitement given the role of Wall Street in the financial crisis and sustaining

neoliberalism.

Much of the details of the Occupy Movement, what are the different forces at play and various ideological predispositions, are lost on us through our distance from the USA, even though the Internet brings everything closer together.

There were initially great illusions amongst large layers of black people in SA regarding Obama's triumphant election as the United States' first black president. Among progressive layers this has collapsed as Obama continued to pursue Bush's war on terror and interventions in the Middle East. Many South Africans were angered by the USA's defense of Mubarak during the Egyptian uprising and the deployment of U.S. military forces to Africa.

The emergence of the Tea Party and other reactionary forces in and around the Republican Party are mainly lost on us. It is when Romney emerges as a presidential candidate and accuses Obama of pursuing socialist policies, and it is reported that 40% of the U.S. population believe that to be true, our eyes glaze over and we tend to give up making sense of politics in the USA.

What makes things especially difficult for us to understand is that with the impact of the economic crisis, the millions of people who have lost their homes and life savings due to the crisis and the role of the 1%, we would expect mass working-class demonstrations, protests and even general strikes. We find it difficult to understand why there are not more Wisconsin moments and why these are not more successful in stopping the elites. After all, they are just the 1%!

(For articles from Amandla! and subscription information [here](#).)

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