

Our Marxism

1. Origins

The SACP has, historically, described its ideological position as Marxist-Leninist. In describing ourselves in this way we have been:

- Locating ourselves as a *revolutionary party* with its historical roots in the Communist International, an international movement which came into existence in 1919, inspired by, and in the direct aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Allegiance to the Communist International (also referred to as the Third International) marked a self-conscious break with what has turned out to be the other major tradition of socialism in the 20th century – social democracy. The Communist Party in South Africa, when it launched in 1921 saw itself as part of an international revolutionary movement, in contrast to the more reformist perspectives and programmes of the social democratic/labour party current.
- Indeed, the founding cores of many Third International parties came from the left of social democratic parties affiliated to the Second International. South Africa was no exception, some of the leading personalities in the launch of the CPSA in 1921 had broken from the SA Labour Party in 1915. The immediate cause of these left platforms was the support given by the right-wing of the social democratic parties to the war-effort of their respective national bourgeoisies in the intra-imperialist First World War (1914-1918). The left, by contrast, called for working class unity across national frontiers. In this context, another core principle of the Third International parties (including the CPSA) was proletarian *internationalism*.
- The third, self-defining feature of the Communist Parties of the Third International was their commitment to building disciplined, *vanguard* parties, made up of revolutionary cadres, unified around a relatively clear, ideological programme. In other words, the Communist Parties, including the CPSA, saw themselves as ideological parties, distinct from broader, ideologically more loose, movement-like parties, which were often typical of the earlier social democratic/labour parties. To maintain the ideological and organisational cohesion of these new Communist Parties, democratic centralism was applied, this meant that while debate and participation by rank-and-file members was encouraged, once programmatic decisions had been taken, disciplined adherence was required. In theory, at least, factions and platforms within the Party were not allowed.

These were the founding, corner-stone principles of the CPSA, and it was these principles that, in the decade and a half after its launch in 1921 came to be described as “Marxist-Leninist”. The SACP continues to believe in the fundamental validity of each of these founding principles. But, of course, we have also always believed in the necessity of a continuous interaction between theory and practice. Not surprisingly, the collective understanding we bring to the concepts of “revolution”, “internationalism” and “vanguard party” have developed enormously in the light of our own South African experience, as well as international revolutionary practice through the course of this 20th century.

2. A Party of revolution

When the CPSA was launched in 1921, it believed that a world socialist revolution was on the agenda. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was a trumpet call

to a world-wide workers' insurrection. The revolution would move rapidly from Russia to the industrial heartland of Europe, and from there it would impact upon the world, including South Africa.

The CPSA comrades were not alone in these hopes, they were very characteristic of the early years of the Communist International. The First World War, so it was believed, demonstrated the terminal crisis of capitalism. As if to confirm this perspective, the end of the war was to be followed by a decade and a half of chronic crisis in the most advanced capitalist countries – marked by mass unemployment, soaring inflation, political instability and the Great Depression.

Moreover, in the first years following the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, there were to be insurrectionary struggles by workers, some of which were partially successful, at least for a short period – in northern Italy, in Hungary, in parts of Germany. But these struggles were contained, and then crushed. Even in South Africa, less than a year after the launch of the CPSA, white workers on the Rand launched an armed struggle against the Chamber of Mines and the Smuts government – the 1922 Rand Revolt. The Rand Revolt was smashed by the Smuts government, deploying the army and even airforce bombers. But this revolt, although partially and loosely inspired by the Bolsheviks, was essentially about white mine-workers seeking to preserve their racially privileged status in the face of the mine-bosses's cost-cutting strategies. While impressed by the class militancy of the white workers the CPSA tried valiantly in 1922, but without much success, to foster the unity of white and black mine-workers.

By the mid and late 1920s, it was apparent that the hoped-for, world-wide Red Revolution, was not around the corner. Only in the Soviet Union workers' power remained relatively intact. The bourgeoisies of countries in which workers had come closest to seizing power turned to the counter-revolution – in Hungary, in Spain, in Italy, in Germany, in Austria – it was not a Red Revolution, but a khaki counter-revolution of fascism and nazism that prevailed.

What had gone wrong? In Moscow, in the Communist International headquarters, the Bulgarian revolutionary, George Dimitroff argued that the newly-formed Communist Parties had isolated themselves from the broader worker and popular movements of their countries. They had failed to build united fronts (with the social democratic and other labour forces), still less broader popular fronts, and had conducted themselves in far too sectarian a manner. They had left space wide open for fascism, which had, in many countries, through a combination of terror and demagoguery, succeeded in mobilising popular forces.

In Italy, Antonio Gramsci (significantly a prisoner in a fascist jail at the time) also grappled, in a vast (and sometimes complex) set of prison writings, with the defeat of the left. Like Dimitroff, he believed that the working class parties had isolated themselves, they had failed to develop a "hegemonic" project, capable of leading the broadest range of popular social forces. Gramsci also argued that in the more developed capitalist countries (like Italy and Germany), communists had seriously underrated the resilience and depth of the capitalist state. Unlike the crisis-ridden, backward, semi-feudal Tsarist state of Russia in 1917, the repressive apparatuses of modern capitalist states were surrounded by vast protective trenches – media, cultural, educational, economic institutions of all kinds. A direct "frontal assault" on the modern capitalist state was unlikely to succeed, unless it had been preceded by a long "war of position" for working class hegemony, across the length and breadth of society. Gramsci was, in effect, beginning to question the simple revolution/reform dichotomy, the war of position for hegemony was going to have to be a



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The Communist Party in South Africa was not to be directly influenced by the writings of Gramsci or Dimitrov until very much later (in the 1970s and 80s). But the CPSA was also compelled to make its own reassessment of what it meant to be a party of revolution, in a world in which the Red Revolution appeared to have receded.

3. A Party of Internationalism

The founding members of the CPSA were white workers and revolutionary intellectuals who brought a variety of modern socialist traditions to South Africa, mainly from Britain and Eastern Europe. From the outset, however, the CPSA's commitment to "internationalism" was understood to mean that it was a Party that sought to represent and organise "all workers". The slogan "Workers of the World Unite", was understood to mean, in South African conditions, the need for the unity of black and white workers. It was this message that the CPSA attempted to propagate (without great success) in the course of the 1922 Rand Revolt.

From the outset the CPSA was committed to non-racialism, not just as a long-term goal for society, but as a reality to be practised within the Party itself. In 1924, long before "affirmative action" was in vogue as a term, the CPSA congress resolved that the Party should "Africanise" itself. This was not just a well-meaning, but empty, resolution. By 1928 the CPSA had 1 750 members, of whom 1 600 were black. More importantly, the Party took practical steps to ensure that African working-class cadres were developed. The Party, in the mid-1920s, pioneered literacy classes, and political education night schools. Very soon, a number of outstanding African comrades, including Albert Nzula (the Party's first African general secretary), Josie Mpama, Johannes Nkosi, Edwin Motsuenyane and Moses Kotane assumed leadership positions within the Party.

From 1924, then, the Party had begun to Africanise itself in terms of its membership and leadership (making it a pioneer, and for most of the next seven decades, the only non-racial political party in terms of membership in South Africa). But the Party's strategic perspective was not yet "Africanised". In 1928/29, partly as the result of an internal debate, and principally as a result of a Communist International resolution, the CPSA changed its strategic perspective to a national liberation struggle in alliance with the still relatively undeveloped ANC. The CPSA began to advance the slogan of majority rule, calling for a Black Republic. The struggle for socialism, the Party now began to argue, was a struggle that had to be waged in the broader context of a national liberation struggle against a form of colonial oppression.

The exact nature of the relationship between the socialist and national liberation struggles was not necessarily clearly elaborated. At times, the national struggle was described as the "form" or "appearance" of the struggle, and the socialist class struggle was the "content" or "essence". At other times, the respective demands of the two struggles were presented as a "minimum" and a "maximum" programme. But, in time, the most common version of the relationship between the struggles was to be the "two-stage thesis" – first there would be a national democratic revolution, and a subsequent socialist stage would follow.

While the left in Europe was revising its hopes of any short-term socialist revolution, and revisiting its strategic assumptions, here in South Africa the Party was also developing, in theory and practice, its own approach to broad, popular front politics. South African communists were no longer readying

themselves for an imminent socialist assault on the bourgeois state in our country. In the South African case, the CPSA increasingly located its practice within the context of national liberation formations – foremost among them, the ANC.

In moving strategically in this direction, the South African party was, in many ways, exploring an important dimension of Lenin’s legacy. Better than many European Marxists, Lenin had understood the profound inter-connection between working class socialist struggles in the developed capitalist countries and the national struggles of colonially oppressed peoples. Lenin was critical of those Marxists who dismissed all nationalism as inherently reactionary, he argued that the nationalism of oppressor nations and that of oppressed peoples were different realities.

For the CPSA, in its first decades, “internationalism” meant two important things – non-racialism, and the location of the South African struggle within the context of an African anti-colonial, anti-imperialist struggle. The current ANC call for an African Renaissance takes place in a different global context, but should be located against the background of this longstanding tradition, pioneered, in part, by the CPSA.

But “internationalism” for the Communist Party in South Africa also meant defence of the Soviet Union (and later the Soviet bloc). In the context of unceasing capitalist hostility and destabilisation efforts directed against the first workers’ state by imperialist powers, the CPSA’s basic position was correct. Later, it was the Soviet Union and its bloc in the key decades of the 1960s and 70s, when our liberation movement had suffered a serious strategic defeat, that offered unquestioning support to our own struggle. South African revolutionaries will never forget this critical role.

However, the degree to which the inevitable twists and turns in the politics of the Soviet state impacted upon our own South African programmes is a subject of debate. To what extent were our own domestic politics affected, for better or worse, by these factors? SACP cadres need to engage in this debate with open minds.

More seriously, we need to note that our own fundamentally correct solidarity with the Soviet Union, often lacked serious balance or nuance. We failed to appreciate, until very late, the horrendous levels of criminal abuse that occurred during the Stalin years, and we failed to be critical of the bureaucratic distortions in the post-Stalin period. We also failed to appreciate, until very late in the day, the levels of internal crisis in the former Soviet Union and Soviet bloc.

Our tardiness in these respects has meant that, in the midst of the otherwise very challenging decade of the 1990s, the SACP has had to devote considerable energies and time to collectively debating and developing a consistent socialist understanding of these questions. The challenge to rescue socialism from the events of 1989-91 and to renew socialist confidence and optimism remains an important priority of the SACP. We believe that the SACP’s internal (but open) debate, and our refusal to give in to opportunism of the right (quietly abandoning socialism and our own history), or dogmatism of the left (pretending nothing serious had happened) has helped us to lay an important foundation to press forward.



4. A Vanguard Party

In its first years, the CPSA saw itself as a tight-knit vanguard Party that would lead a workers’ insurrection in South Africa, in response to the deepening world crisis of capitalism. In its early years, the Party did not neglect

mass work, and indeed many of its key cadres were leading members in the labour movement. There was, however, a tendency for the Party to set up its own union and national liberation front structures. While these played a pioneering role, they were often somewhat inorganic.

The 1928/9 strategic shift to a national liberation perspective began to force the Party to think more profoundly about mass work, and about working with non-communists in building existing formations, like the ANC and ICU (the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union). This naturally began to pose questions about how a vanguard party works, and, indeed, if the Party would be leading the “first stage” of the struggle.

Unfortunately, the fruitful potential in this strategic shift was not immediately to impact fully on the tactics, organisational practices and theory of the Party. The strategic shift coincided with a period of heightened internal factionalism. This factionalism was partly imported from the Communist International, where Stalinism was deepening its grip in a series of bloody factional battles. The distant echo of these was felt in the CPSA, often brought by Communist International representatives sent to South Africa. But the dangers of a dogmatic vanguardism also became evident in this period. Ideological debates within the Party were turned into factional battles for bureaucratic control. Leading Party pioneers, among them SP Bunting, were unjustly expelled. Many other members left in disillusion.

It was only in the middle of the 1930s that the CPSA began to recover from this unfortunate period. The recovery was helped by the change in Communist International strategies towards popular front strategies, and the CPSA was able to fuse the popular front approach with its own strategic commitment to a national liberation struggle. But the recovery was, especially, the consequence of the new generation of African communists, grouped around Moses Kotane, who insisted on a Party that was more rooted in its practice and theory in the realities of South Africa itself. In his famous “Cradock Letter” of 1934, Kotane wrote to the CPSA’s Johannesburg District Party Committee:

“the Party is beyond the realm of realities, we are simply theoretical and our theory is less connected with practice. If one investigates the general ideology of our Party members (especially the whites), if sincere, he will not fail to see that they subordinate South Africa in the interests of Europe, in fact, ideologically they are not S Africans... they are ‘revolutionaries’ and ‘Bolsheviks’, their hobbies are ‘the German situation and the comintern, Stalin and Trotsky’ and ‘the errors of various communist parties’ (...) The CPSA must pay special attention to S Africa, study the conditions of this country and concretise the demands of the toiling masses from first hand information, that we must speak the language of the toiling masses and must know their demands. That while it must not lose its international allegiance, the Party must be Bolshevised, become South African not only theoretically but in reality...”

In the 1940s the CPSA emerged as a powerful political force, possibly more influential than the ANC in this period. Its night-school and political education work continued. Communists were active in the trade unions and other mass formations. The Party also had a significant ideological influence on South African life through the work of Party journalists in mass-circulation newspapers.

The first piece of legislative political repression enacted by the National Party, after its election in 1948, was the banning of the Communist Party in 1950. In 1953, the Party re-launched clandestinely as the SACP. In the conditions of illegality, the meaning attached to being a vanguard Party acquired new significance.

Members were carefully recruited after a period of close probation. Democratic centralism was meticulously enforced, and the “need to know”

principle applied, members only knew as much as was required for their operations, at the relevant level of their involvement. In developing these approaches the SACP was able to draw on the considerable international Communist experience, especially the war-time resistance experience of persecuted Communist parties that had bravely played a vanguard role in the anti-fascist struggle.

When, in 1960 the ANC was banned, and in 1961 when the armed struggle was launched, nearly a decade of clandestine SACP experience was to be vital for the survival of the broader movement. Nevertheless, the liberation movement as a whole badly miscalculated the strength and ruthlessness of the apartheid regime, and by the mid-1960s the liberation movement had suffered a serious strategic defeat.

In exile, in prison, and in the underground, the SACP vanguard strengths were to play an absolutely major role in ensuring the survival, regrouping and eventual victory of the ANC-led liberation movement. The discipline, the ideological seriousness and political education traditions, the internationalism and longer-term vision of the Party were decisive factors in ensuring the survival of the national liberation movement.

The SACP's 1962 programme, *The Road to South African Freedom*, was an especially valuable programmatic perspective that was to play a key role within the entire liberation movement for the next two and a half decades. It was here that the concept of "colonialism of a special type" (CST) received its first sustained and collective elaboration. The concept has since formed the basis of our approach to the national democratic revolution and alliance politics. By invoking this concept the 1962 programme located the South African struggle within the context of a broader continental process ("The African Revolution" was the title of an entire chapter). The African decolonisation process was under-way at the time, and the struggles of Africa's peoples confronted a clear choice – a neo-colonial stagnation, or the consolidation and deepening of national democratic transformation.

The SACP played a major role in the survival of the ANC, but there were other crucial factors as well, including the outstanding leadership contribution made by senior ANC comrades, among them OR Tambo, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu.

The ANC emerged, in 1990, from prison, from exile and from the underground, more unified and with more prestige and legitimacy than it had ever enjoyed. The period of illegality (30 years) was long, and the dispersal of the ANC across the globe had been extreme. Exile, prison, the underground, military camps – none of these are easy realities to survive (as the factionalised histories of many other movements forced into these circumstances testify). The SACP played a decisive vanguard role in fostering the unity and morale of the ANC in this period, and we are proud of this achievement.

The major influence of the SACP upon the ANC in the decades of the 1960s and 70s was augmented by the unstinting solidarity of the Soviet Union, and by the worldwide advance of communist and communist-aligned liberation movements – China, Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, and later Mozambique and Angola. At the Morogoro, Conference in 1969, in its "Strategy and Tactics" document, the ANC noted that the South African national liberation struggle was

"happening in a new kind of world – a world which is no longer monopolised by the imperialist world system; a system in which the existence of the powerful socialist system and a significant sector of newly liberated areas has altered the balance of forces..."

The Morogoro, Conference characterised the global conjuncture as one marked by the "transition from capitalism to socialism".

These perspectives are evidence of the extent to which SACP thinking was



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influencing the ANC at the time. But it is also a reminder, of how, in this period, the main line of historical advance appeared to be moving. This perception was not just a view within communist and progressive circles, many leading imperialist ideologues spoke in alarm of a ripple of “falling dominoes”, as one Third World country after another appeared to be moving into the socialist camp. The Party’s influence was naturally boosted by the mood of the times.

Ironically, these decades of heightened SACP influence and prestige within the liberation movement coincided with a relatively low Party profile, with minimal independent SACP organisation, and, perhaps, a neglect of developing independent socialist thinking. It is easy to understand the factors at work. In the aftermath of the liberation movement’s strategic defeat in the mid-1960s, communists worked tirelessly and selflessly to rebuild the ANC, MK and to foster a broad, international anti-apartheid movement. This practical emphasis was, undoubtedly, correct, but it had its own down-side, since it took energies away from the SACP in its own right.

As far as developing socialist thinking and programmatic perspectives, there was a considerable reliance on Soviet political education (which was generously provided), but this also meant that there was not a dynamic indigenous development of socialist thinking within the Party at this time. Tendencies towards “two stageism” possibly also gave reasons to delay any profound elaboration of socialist perspectives. However, within the country, on campuses and in the re-emerging trade union movement there was a significant and dynamic flowering of left-wing thinking, influenced by an international resurgence of progressive ideologies after 1968. Of course, this flowering of left-thinking (notably influenced by new left marxisms, and by Black Power Afro-American writers) was not without its own illusions, distortions, and confusions – but, for its part, the SACP was not always effective or even helpfully located in the midst of these progressive developments.

From 1985, however, there was a renewed effort from within the Party to build more dynamic SACP underground structures within the country, with a particular emphasis on interacting with the trade union movement. There was also an intensification of ideological debate, and the SACP through its organs (*The African Communist* and the resurrected *Umsebenzi*) began now to reflect and impact more dynamically upon left debate and theory in our country.

All of this constitutes some of the collective heritage that South African communists have brought into the challenging and complex 1990s.

5. Revisiting Marxism-Leninism in the 1990s

In February 1990, the SACP was unbanned after 40 years of illegality. In nearly 70 years of unbroken struggle, the SACP was at the height of its popularity. Opinion polls within South Africa suggested that, after Nelson Mandela, leading communists like Chris Hani and Joe Slovo were amongst the most popular political figures in our country. Paradoxically, this domestic popularity for the Party and its key leaders coincided in time with the most serious international crisis for the broad Communist movement, and its legacy. Economic stagnation, an inability to sustain the Cold War arms race, unwieldy bureaucratism, and general popular dissatisfaction led to the rapid demise of the old Soviet bloc, and of the Soviet Union itself.

Cadres within the recently unbanned SACP were faced with three possible options in these circumstances –

- to quietly allow membership to lapse (a choice taken in mid-1990 by a significant percentage of the leadership that had been elected at the 7th Congress the year before);

- to pretend that “nothing was wrong”, and to cruise along on our struggle-era popularity and credentials; or
- to assume responsibility, as the SACP, for our legacy, for its strengths and weaknesses, and through discussion and debate, to work for the renewal of the socialist project within our country and, indeed, internationally.

The leadership core around Slovo and Hani, and the SACP’s 8th, 9th and 10th Congresses (in 1991, 1995 and 1998) decisively chose this last option. This was not the easiest option, but it has been endorsed by tens of thousands of SACP members. At the time of its unbanning, the SACP’s membership was a few thousand strong, much of it in exile. By 1998, membership had multiplied, with some 80,000 signed up members, of whom around 14,000 constitute an activist core.

But to build the SACP as a relevant force for our times has required an ongoing collective renewal of our Marxist perspectives. We believe that, in 1998, we have now moved sufficiently along the path of this process to be able to enumerate, with a sense of collective unity, some of the key ideological features of this renewal. These features can be directly related to the key themes we have been using throughout this brief overview of the Party’s evolving ideological positions – revolution, internationalism and the vanguard.



5.1 Revolution and reform

The split in the international socialist movement in 1915 established the two major currents of socialism in this century – the communist and the social democratic. The communist current defined itself, at first, as a movement directed strategically at the proletarian seizure of bourgeois state power.

In practice this vision of the transition to socialism never materialised, at least not precisely in the form envisaged. In the first place, as we have argued above, the revolution in the “West”, in the years immediately following 1917, did not take place. If anything, in the decades after 1917, the revolution happened in the “East”, and then, later, in the “South”. From China, to Cuba, to Vietnam and Mozambique, it was largely peasant armies (often supported by worker struggles), in the context of national liberation movements, that waged successful armed struggles. These struggles were guided by leadership cores, and in some cases by a Communist Party, drawing on the communist tradition. They were not, really, proletarian insurrections in the mould of 1917.

After the defeat of Nazism in Europe in 1944, a series of East European states joined the Soviet bloc. Although there had been important left forces in most of these countries, the decisive factor here (with the important exception of Yugoslavia) was the role of the Soviet Red Army in the defeat of nazism throughout the region. However, the sense that socialism had been externally imposed in these countries was to be a crucial factor in the demise of this bloc in the 1989-91 period.

Looking back over the seventy year history of this Soviet-inspired project to build socialism, it is clear that it was only really successful (and partially at that) in underdeveloped societies, most emerging from colonial or neo-colonial oppression. The socialist path was, in many respects, a partial de-linking (sometimes actively chosen, often imposed) from the imperialist system. This de-linking created space for underdeveloped societies to make significant developmental gains, to advance a national and democratic project, and (in countries like Cuba, for instance) to make genuine and major advances in socialising the economy and society in general. The sheer size of the Soviet Union, its vast physical resources and massive internal market, and later the

similar assets of the Peoples Republic of China, allowed this partial de-linking to be sustained for some decades. The existence of a socialist bloc (not without its own many internal contradictions), in turn, allowed smaller and otherwise isolated societies (like Cuba) to pursue similar paths of development.

We believe that the era of “socialism in one bloc” is over, and perhaps was never a longer term sustainable strategy. While partial and active de-linking from the global imperialist system is still absolutely essential, a project of socialist isolationism, of “fortress socialism”, will only end in imprisoning the very people on behalf of whom the socialism is supposed to be consolidated. In the remaining societies of what we once called “actually existing socialism”, societies in which important elements of socialism remain intact, (like Cuba, the PRC, and Vietnam, for instance), there are clearly major debates and uncertainties. But all progressive forces in these countries accept the necessity of engaging with the capitalist system. Socialist gains have to be defended and taken forward on the terrain of a capitalist dominated world, and not in some “other world”, some “other time zone”, behind a “wall”.

But it is not just the defence of socialism that requires an active engagement on the terrain of capitalism itself. In societies like South Africa socialism will have to be built in a country, a region and a world dominated by capitalism.

This basic statement compels us to revisit any simplistic opposition of “revolution” and “reform”. In a sense, as we have been arguing above, the communist movement has been revisiting this simple opposition since the late 1920s – but the time has come to now do this more consciously, and explicitly.

The 1915 split between communist and social democratic parties, and the subsequent history of this split, established an often very crude set of contrasts. Communists were supposedly revolutionary insurrectionists, social democrats were pursuing “the parliamentary road”. The vast historical struggle for a socialist transformation was often reduced to a debate on how best the “decisive break-through” should be made (insurrection or elections?), an “event” became the key defining feature of different socialist currents. Of course, this is a very crude interpretation of the politics and programmes of actual communist and social democratic parties, but we still hear voices arguing as if there were two simplistic and contrasting options.

The struggle for socialism is a vast, historical struggle to shift the balance of class forces towards working people and other popular forces. This struggle has not been, and will not be, a simple evolutionary development, guaranteed by history. Taking place on the terrain of a world dominated by capitalism, it is marked by unevenness, by moments of stagnation, by advances, ruptures, by reverses, and, no doubt, by decisive moments. To understand this struggle as a simple contrast between revolution and reform is not helpful.

Revolutions that seize commanding heights, and which install new ruling elites that force-march their societies into “modernisation” and “development”, using managerialist techniques that are little different (and sometimes much harsher) than those in capitalist production, are bound to fail the socialist project. Seizing commanding heights, transferring power, without transforming the nature and institutionalisation of power, will not advance socialism in any sustainable way.

Struggles to reform power relations, including capitalist production relations, are not mere “dress rehearsals” for the “real thing” that will come sooner or later (a seizure of power). Intensive structural reforms must precede and must follow any decisive democratic or, indeed, socialist break-through. Such a break-through may come through armed insurrection, negotiation, elections, sustained mass pressure, as the relatively successful outcome of a

civil war, or a war of national liberation, or, as in the case of South Africa's breakthrough in 1994, a partial combination of all of the above.

By contrast, reform for reform's sake is also not a viable socialist strategy. Reforms that are unstrategic, that lack a transformational agenda, that serve to legitimise and entrench capitalism (or gender or race oppression), and which transform working class and popular forces into grateful spectators are, bluntly, unacceptably "reformist".

5.2 A mass-driven transformation process

There is another powerful struggle tradition within our country that has influenced our Party, and to which, in turn, our Party has made an important contribution. It is also a tradition that challenges notions of a simple opposition between reform and revolution. The tradition was born, partly, out of the defiance strategies pioneered by Mahatma Gandhi here in South Africa in the early part of the century, and then applied on a vast scale in the Indian national liberation struggle.

Soon after Indian independence, Dr Yusuf Dadoo, later to become SACP general secretary, visited Gandhi in India, reflecting a personal admiration but also an understanding that important lessons were to be garnered from the Indian struggle.

In 1946 the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses revived Gandhi's passive resistance strategies here in South Africa, leading defiance struggles against the Ghetto Act. The inspiring example of these campaigns had, in turn, a direct impact upon the revival of the ANC in the early 1950s, notably with the 1952 Defiance Campaign, which marked the beginning of a mass-line within the ANC and its broader Congress Movement. The traditions of the Defiance Campaign were carried forward in the 1950s and early 60s, in consumer boycotts, bus boycotts, pass burnings, the boycott (and destruction) of municipal beer-halls, and mass national political stay-aways.

The significance of these strategies needs to be located, in part, within the context of a struggle against colonial (or special colonial) rule. In the first place, many of these actions seek to embarrass and render unworkable the exclusion and simultaneous inferior inclusion of nationally oppressed peoples, by way of mass defiance of colonial regulations that deprive the nationally oppressed of basic citizenship rights. In the second place, these actions often depend for their success on using the very exclusion of racially oppressed peoples (into ghettos, townships, bush colleges and gutter education schools, and rural reserves) as a weapon to boycott their inferior inclusion as workers (the stay-at-home), as consumers (the boycott of potatoes, or tobacco, or white shops), as students (class boycotts), and as commuters (bus boycotts).

More generally, these strategies are also based on the experience of many progressive anti-colonial struggles, in which independence has been won, not as a result of the revolutionary defeat of the colonial power's metropolitan state apparatus, but more by rendering continued colonial rule too costly. This escalation of cost to the metropolitan power has been the product of diverse factors – including wasting armed struggles in distant places, mass defiance, or a revolution (precipitated in large measure by distant liberation struggles) in the metropolitan power centre itself (as in Portugal in April 1974).



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Characteristically in the 20th century, progressive national liberation struggles have won independence through protracted struggle that has culminated, not in an insurrectionary overthrow, but in negotiations.

In South Africa, in the late 1970s and 1980s, the mass defiance strategy was revived, in circumstances which highlight one other important feature of this tradition. Colonial (and in our case, special colonial) rule relies on a variety of subordinate state apparatuses to administer and control colonial subjects. There was considerable racist inventiveness in South Africa over the 20th century in the elaboration of these subordinate apparatuses – the reinvention of chieftaincy, “independent” bantustans, black local authorities and, towards the end, there was even a “tri-racial parliament”.

It is often said by the cynical that the ANC-led liberation movement failed to overthrow the apartheid regime. This is true, of course, but the cynics fail to appreciate that the democratic breakthrough of 1994 was won, primarily, because of the strategic political defeat of apartheid. At the heart of this strategic defeat was the fact that millions of South Africans had rendered the subordinate state apparatuses (bantustans, the tricameral parliament, the black local authorities, inferior education) illegitimate and unworkable. Cynics also scoff at the slogan of “ungovernability” or bewail that it is the cause of present woes. In fact, ungovernability was a profoundly correct strategy of the anti-apartheid struggle, and it was directed at defying the special colonial apparatuses that oppressed the majority.

In the period 1990-1994, the traditions of mass mobilisation and the defiance of illegitimate authority were a critical factor in transforming the balance of forces in the negotiations process.

A simplistic dichotomy between revolution and reform would be unable to classify these mass traditions, let alone clarify them. As the SACP, we draw on this long tradition within our country to affirm our belief that the struggle for a socialist transition is not about a simple choice of reform or revolution, but a challenge to combine reform and revolution in a sustained mass-based transformational struggle.

For the SACP, the challenge in the present is to sustain a struggle for “revolutionary-reforms” – these are reforms that are not isolated improvements, but which attack the core of capitalist (race and gender) power, which have a transformational capacity, which use the new possibilities of state and legislative power, which build up organisational mass momentum, keeping the capitalist ruling bloc off-balance, and increasingly empower working class and popular forces as their own emancipators.

Revisiting the reform-revolution opposition also compels a review of what we now understand by internationalism.

5.3 Internationalism in the new millennium

The Communist International critique of social democracy was certainly not without foundation. Social democratic leaderships that sided with their respective bourgeoisies in the First World War were often, objectively, seeking to protect privileges that had been possible in the context of a colonial and imperialist division of global power and spoils. They often represented the interests of a “labour aristocracy”. The evolution of the Labour Party in South Africa illustrates this reality in an extreme form – born from the white working class labour movement, the party aligned itself with the racist National Party in the 1920s, in defence of “civilised standards” for white workers, and then disappeared altogether, with its project swallowed up in apartheid white welfarism.

As we have noted in the first chapter of this programme, in the post-1945 period, important gains were scored by the working class in many developed economies, under the political leadership of social democratic parties. In the left of these parties, the vision of a more substantial socialist transformation was advanced, but, generally, the gains won improved the conditions of working people, but failed to progressively weaken capitalism. With the change in global economic conditions in the early 1970s, because class realities had not been substantially transformed, there was a resurgent capitalist offensive in these societies against welfare gains, and against organised working class forces.

In the developed countries, these processes have led to a variety of tendencies within the old social democratic formations – on the one hand, a narrowing focus on elections, a continued drift towards the centre, and attempts to weaken the social weight of organised labour on the electoral party machinery. This centre-wards trend is not going unchallenged, however, in these societies. Struggles to defend welfare gains, trade union rights, and to advance innovative strategies, like the demand for a 35-hour working week, are being taken up actively.

In the conditions of growing globalisation, working class and other progressive forces in these societies are also more inclined to work in solidarity with progressive forces in the South. The major imperialist corporations operate transnationally, it is no longer possible for German workers, for instance, to defend their gains in Volkswagen plants, independently of close solidarity with workers in Brazil, Mexico and South Africa. Old Cold War divisions have abated, especially in the international labour movement. These are realities of strategic redefinition and realignment in which our ally COSATU is playing an important international role. But they also have implications for the SACP and ANC.

The changing realities of capitalism, especially in the most developed capitalist economies, have also produced the social conditions in which a wide range of new, generally progressive, social movements have emerged – international solidarity, anti-racist and human rights groups of all kinds, ecological movements, peace movements and gender rights groups. Many of these groups played an outstanding role in the international anti-apartheid struggle. Partly born out of this practical experience, the SACP's own understanding of "internationalism" and of "internationalist work" has developed considerably. The need for, and the possibilities of wide-ranging, multi-lateral international relations with a broad network of formations, many of which are not self-declared communist or socialist forces, is obvious.

5.4 A vanguard Party for the present and the future

The question of the character of the Party confronted the SACP directly and quite dramatically in the 1990s, and the issue was debated extensively at our 8th and 9th Congresses. Emerging out of 40 years of illegality, with a small, tightly knit cadreship, we were suddenly presented with new organisational challenges and possibilities.

It was clear to the Party that the organisational priority, once more, was not the building of the SACP, but of the ANC – to ensure that it was massive, rooted among the popular masses organisationally, and that it developed progressive policies and a capacity to negotiate effectively, win elections and govern. Once more, leading Party cadres, at all levels, devoted themselves (along with many non-communists) to this critical organisational priority.

But what of the Party itself? What organisational form, in the first place,



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should it assume? Many comrades argued that the Party should retain a tight, “vanguard” character, that there should be careful selectivity in recruitment, that the Party should seek to be well organised and ideologically advanced, influential through the clarity and quality of its cadres, rather than through the size of its membership. Given the strategic organisational priority of rebuilding the ANC, given the limitation of resources in the Party, and given our own decades of underground discipline, there was much that was attractive in this position.

However, there were also obvious problems. The first half of the 1990s were, necessarily, a period of considerable ideological fluidity in and around the Party, and a significant number of comrades from the central committee elected in 1989 had allowed their membership to lapse. If membership were to be based on a closely supervised period of probation, who was to do the supervising? And around what stabilised ideological framework was this probation to be conducted? In the fluidity of the period, the danger that probation and tight recruiting would become factionalised was obvious.

What is more, in the early 1990s there was an overwhelming demand for Party membership from tens of thousands of comrades. Many were seasoned revolutionaries from the trade union movement, from the mass democratic movement and from the underground ANC – they had been unable to connect effectively with our clandestine structures in the preceding decades, but many had conducted pro-SACP work in their organisations notwithstanding. They were ready, willing and perfectly capable of making a major contribution to rebuilding the SACP and advancing the socialist project.

At the 1991 8th Congress, the SACP resolved to build itself as a “mass vanguard” party. For those who like metaphysical elegance this may have seemed like a contradiction in terms, but it was, broadly, the correct decision. The Congress distinguished the role of the Party (which was to remain that of a socialist vanguard within the context of a broader liberation movement), and the organisational character of the Party (which was now to be more mass-based). This resolution pointed the Party in the right direction. The Party benefited enormously from the influx of thousands of outstanding new cadres, and generally the Party succeeded in welding together the different streams of our movement (exile, underground, mass democratic movement and prison) than our alliance partner, the ANC. Being an effective and developed communist cadre was now seen less as an entry requirement, and more as something that, collectively, the Party should help you to become. This general orientation was correct, which is not to say that the SACP has yet adequately stabilised effective organisational structures.

The precise organisational role, and therefore the size of Party we are seeking to build remain the subject of debate in our Party, but we have, in the course of this decade built a substantial Party organisation, and accumulated real organisational experience that has moved us beyond the parameters of the debates of the early 1990s.

6. Taking theory seriously

One matter on which we are collectively clear is that a key aspect of the SACP’s vanguard role lies in the domain of ideological work – of taking theory seriously, of ensuring continuous political education and strategic debate within our Party and in our broader movement, of engaging the broader public debate with consistent anticapitalist, socialist perspectives. In this respect, we are obviously building on long Party traditions in South Africa – the traditions of night-schools, of cadre development, of independent Party

publications, and of progressive journalism.

Theory, we have always affirmed is not dogma, it needs to continuously inform and be informed by collective, organised revolutionary practice. In the course of the 1990s, the SACP has begun to broaden its Marxism in several significant ways, in particular we should high-light:

6.1 The limitations of “productivism” - a blindness to gender oppression

Marxism developed on the foundations (and as a critique) of classical bourgeois economics. In its heyday, before capitalism was dominated by a parasitic financial sector, bourgeois economics focused upon production and, therefore, on labour. It was this focus that was central to Marxism as well. The focus was not wrong, but it led to a tendency to down-play the critical reproductive side of economies, and societies at large. This, in turn, led to a neglect of the fact that capitalist profit maximisation is based not just on exploitative production relations, but critically on oppressive reproductive power relations.

This theoretical tendency was reinforced by the sociology of communist and socialist parties, emerging as they often did from the largely blue-collar, male, labour movements of the turn of the century. Liberation movements and communist parties of the South have also tended to subordinate gender issues, in part due to theoretical limitations, but more fundamentally due to patriarchal relations within our organisations.

The focus on production obscured the central economic and social role played by “non-economic” activity in the reproduction of society – the rearing of children, caring for the sick and elderly, house-hold management, and shopping. Much of this work is borne by women, and the failure to adequately account for it has led to an historical blindness around gender oppression in many socialist and communist formations. Insofar as programmatic solutions were offered for overcoming gender oppression, they tended themselves to be “productivist” solutions: by drawing women into productive, waged-labour they would be liberated from the prison of their homes. In practice, while women have been partially liberated by being wage-earners in their own right, they have also typically had to carry a double burden – formal waged labour during the day, and informal, unpaid reproductive labour before and after that.

The SACP believes that a key task in taking forward, developing and renewing the socialist project requires a much greater theoretical and practical attention to reproductive labour, and it is here that much of the intersection between class and gender oppression is to be found. The dialogue between Marxism and feminism over the past decades needs to be drawn on in the theoretical development of our understanding of gender oppression. The absence of gender as a category of analysis can result in a flawed understanding of the complexity of social power relations and hence to strategic errors in the practice of the Party.

6.2 Neglect of environmental sustainability

“Productivist” exaggerations have also led to a neglect of environmental sustainability. In former socialist countries, like the Soviet Union, the construction of socialism was often conceptualised in very technocratic and managerialist terms, as a forced-march into modernisation. Socialism was about “catching up” with the West in terms of physical outputs (tons of steel, coal or



the focus on production obscured the central economic and social role of “non-economic” reproductive activity

wheat, kilojoules of electricity). Scant attention was paid to environmental sustainability (another key dimension of the reproduction of economies and societies).

However, whatever the past shortcomings, environmentally sustainable development is not feasible in a globe dominated by capitalism. The achievement of sustainable development is integrally linked to the achievement of a socialist future.

The critique of an exaggerated “productivism” needs also to be carried forward, in theory and practice, by the SACP on the front of struggle for a safe, people-friendly and sustainable environment.

6.3 What is theory?

When we write or speak about our practical experience as the SACP we are proud of referring to our own indigenous experience. But when we speak about theory, our reference points tend to be the “classics” of socialism – Marx, Engels and Lenin. There is no doubt about the outstanding contribution each of these have made to socialism – but is communist theory something only associated with outstanding (usually male) revolutionaries from Europe whose “Collected Works” fill a library shelf? In celebrating, in reading and debating Marx, Engels and Lenin, have we contributed, unwittingly, to a particular image of what being a communist means?

In the struggle for the renewal of the socialist project, the SACP must expose its membership and the broader mass movement to the widest range of progressive writings and theory – including to those who were often suppressed because they were considered “dissident” – Bukharin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxemburg.

We need, also, to acknowledge our indebtedness to a wide range of Third World revolutionary theorists among them Ho Chi Minh, Le Duan, Mao Tse Tung, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Fidel Castro, and many more.

We need to understand and popularise the contribution made by outstanding African revolutionaries – like Amilear Cabral and Agostino Neto – and theorists like Samir Amin. Moreover, we need to understand the contribution made to our own Party’s theory and practice by many African revolutionaries, who were not necessarily from within the traditions of Marxism-Leninism – Julius Nyerere, Frantz Fanon, and many others. Our movement and our Party have also been influenced by generations of revolutionary and progressive Afro-Americans.

Above all, we need to broaden our understanding of revolutionary theory so that we have a much better grasp of the contribution made to the SACP’s ideological positions by thousands of South Africans – from the early revolutionary pioneers, David Ivon Jones, SP Bunting, Albert Nzula, Eddie Roux, through Moses Kotane, JB Marks, Jack and Ray Simons, Govan Mbeki, Yusuf Dadoo, Bram Fischer, Alex La Guma, MP Naicker, Mick Harmel to Duma Nokwe, Ruth First and Joe Slovo, Comrade Mzala, Matthew Goniwe and Chris Hani. Some have left us with fairly extensive theoretical writings, often published in other MK names, or in the shape of collective documents, or in training manuals. Others, like Hani, made their theoretical contribution in hundreds of unrecorded speeches. The SACP also needs to appreciate the degree to which our theoretical positions have been influenced by many generations of outstanding, non-communist revolutionaries in our broader liberation movement – among them OR Tambo

In seeking to do justice to our SACP theoretical legacy, we have to move even beyond this. In a society like our own, where there are extremely high

levels of illiteracy, in which there are now eleven different official languages, and in which, on the other hand, there are powerful traditions of oral culture (speech-making, funeral orations, song, poetry, and just plain umrabulo) it is critical that we do not over-privilege one form of theorising (in a book, written in a global language like English) and marginalise knowledge, theory, debate and learning that happen in other ways.

If we broaden our understanding of theory, debate and learning, we will better be able to appreciate how a shack-dwelling activist like Dora Tamana pioneered in the 1950s a socialist co-operative movement for child-care and food distribution, guided by her own township experiences and inspired by a brief visit to the Soviet Union. Tamana made a major contribution to our collective understanding, but you will not find it in any book written by her. Yet she recounted this experience in many forums, and helped to inspire the relaunching of mass democratic movement structures in the 1980s.

We are advancing these views not in opposition to formal learning, or to denigrate the importance of books and publications, still less because we espouse some demagogic anti-theoretical stance. The SACP takes theory very seriously, it is precisely because we do so, that we find it important to elaborate our understanding of what theory is.

The SACP is not ashamed to call itself Marxist-Leninist, but then we are also Moses Kotaneists and Dora Tamanists. In doing this we are also reminding ourselves that much work needs to be done to empower comrades, and notably woman comrades, to ensure that they are able to contribute fully and effectively to the theoretical heritage of our Party.

6.4 Breaking with dogma

Linked to all of the above is the need to break out of the bureaucratic grip of dogma. The institutionalisation of socialism in the Soviet Union in the Stalin years established a tradition of Marxism-Leninism that sought to be all-embracing, total. Marxism-Leninism became a “science” of everything, from agronomy to class struggle, from art theory and psychology to the “universal laws of motion”. The actual Marx and Lenin had struggled fiercely against “metaphysics” and “speculative philosophy”, and yet this is what often came to be enshrined as Marxism-Leninism.

If Marxism-Leninism was to be all-embracing, then it followed that theories, sciences, aesthetic approaches, ethical and world-views that differed from those that were formally endorsed were necessarily “antagonistic” and “reactionary”. This had many dire and negative consequences.

One obvious area was in the relationship between communism and religion. Instead of approaching the social reality of religious belief with an historical, class and dialectical understanding, communists tended to approach religion metaphysically – it was seen mechanically and dogmatically as a “rival” belief system to be defeated at all costs.

The practice, theory and organisation of the SACP seeks to base itself on a dialectical and historical materialist approach to society, history and struggle. There is no reason why religious believers should not (and in practice many do) contribute actively to a dialectical and historical materialist approach to these matters. This, as far as we are concerned, is what defines communists. There will, of course, be differences between those who seek to apply materialism to all aspects of knowledge and reality, and those who are religious believers. In the struggle for communism such differences are entirely non-antagonistic.



In practice, in the SACP, there have always been comrades of religious persuasion (including many religious ministers), but their involvement has tended to be seen as an anomaly. The truth, however, is that these comrades were attracted to our Party not despite their religious beliefs and values – but because of them. And it is because of their religious views that many were, and are, outstanding communists. Sadly, many thousands of other South Africans have been attracted by the moral and political message of communism, only to feel excluded by the “atheism” of our Party.

The SACP reaffirms its commitment to the right of anyone to hold (or not to hold) religious beliefs. The SACP is not defined by being either a Party of atheists or believers. This is a matter of principle, and not opportunism. Our class approach to reality (a bias towards the poor), our struggle for a society based on social need and not on private profit, our condemnation of selfishness, and personal greed, and our refusal to give way to demoralisation (in other words, our espousing of hope) are closer to the core values of all of the world’s major religions than the ethos of globalisation, imperialism and the Johannesburg Stock Market. Dogmatic errors from the side of Marxists, and the class abuse of institutionalised religion by many reactionary forces, have historically contributed to a dichotomy between socialists and believers that should never have happened.

In struggling, as communists, against the strangle-hold of dogma, we are reaffirming that our theory is dynamic, living and engaged with collective practice. The renewal of the socialist project requires an understanding that there is no single way of “being a communist”. There are a thousand ways of being a communist, and some of those ways would not even admit to the name “communist”.

150 years ago, Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto, called on communists not to see themselves as a breed apart, as a sect removed from society, and especially not from the broader working class movement as a whole. Communists, they declared:

“have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mould the proletarian movement. The Communists are distinguished from the other working-class parties by this only. (1) In the national struggles of the proletarians of different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality. (2) In the various stages of the development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”

As South African communists, members of a Party that has been in the midst of working class and popular struggles stretching over three-quarters of a century, we draw strength from this vision of the role of communists. It is a vision that we believe has been exemplified, developed and enriched in our own struggle traditions.