

# Has Socialism left the Party?

REFLECTIONS ON THE 12TH NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE SACP

**Michael Sachs** assesses the strategic perspectives emerging from the SACP's 12th National Congress, and questions the current character of the party

International delegates to the 12th National Congress of the South African Communist Party (SACP) were visibly moved by the choir's stirring rendition of the *Internationale*, the socialist anthem which brought proceedings to a close. "Reason thunders new creation" they sang, "it is a better world in birth!" But the harmonies that captured the imagination of the local delegates were inspired by more domestic and immediate concerns. Among the favourites were *Siyaya eLimpopo and Lelilizwe* and *ngelamaKomanisi, kungcono silitathe*. These popular choices reflected the gathering's exclusive focus on issues of power and policy in the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and its failure to relate these to the tasks of creating a new, socialist society.

The SACP has a long and proud history of applying Marxist theory to analyse contemporary society and connect the tasks of socialists in the NDR with the struggle for a socialist future. But there is widespread concern amongst cadres of the Party and its sympathisers about the paucity of original thinking and considered Marxist analysis arising from the 12th congress. Instead, the congress was concerned mainly with frustrations and unhappiness about the implementation of ANC policy and the functioning of the Alliance.

Substantive debate focussed almost exclusively on the question of 'State Power'. Underlying this debate is the question of

whether the Party should influence the state through a reconfigured Alliance, or contest state power directly, independently and in opposition to the ANC. Unfortunately even here debate was somewhat shallow, arising largely from frustration, and lacking any basis in sober Marxist analysis. Such analysis would need to re-consider the immediate tasks of socialists in the NDR and the consequences for the Alliance, but also re-evaluate the ultimate goal of the SACP's activism. The state power debate lacked substance because, since it did not address the question of socialism, it could not answer the question: what is it that the working class will do with state power that fundamentally differs from what the ANC is already doing?

The congress did identify numerous concerns, disagreements and divergent points of emphasis on the *minimum programme* which the Party shares with the ANC. However, it was devoid of any significant discussion on the meaning of the SACP's own *maximum programme*.

## The SA road to socialism

The question of a socialist future for South Africa and its contemporary meaning could have been engaged. After all, the new SACP programme, released shortly before congress was entitled the *South African Road to Socialism (SARS)*. But SARS was not presented to the congress and delegates made little reference to it in their deliberations on the question of state power.

This is reflected in the resolutions adopted, which mentions the word 'socialism' only twice – once in the context of the struggle against patriarchy and once in relation to the 'know your neighbourhood' campaign. Defeating patriarchy and knowing your neighbourhood are said to be central in the 'the struggle for socialism'. The word 'communism' doesn't get a single mention.

It is also reflected in the SARS programme itself, which was adopted without amendment. Despite the lofty ambition of its title, the shortest chapter in the document is the one headed "The SACP and Socialism", which begins with a definition: "Socialism is a transitional social system between capitalism (and other systems based on class exploitation) and a fully classless, communist society. A socialist society has a mixed economy, but one in which the socialised component of the economy is dominant and hegemonic. The socialised economy is that part of the economy premised on meeting social needs and not private profits."<sup>1</sup>

The chapter goes on to detail the various aspects of the mixed economy including empowerment of workers on the shop floor, a wide range of social ownership forms, rolling back and transforming capitalist markets and ensuring food security and the sustainable use of resources.

This is remarkably similar to the ANC's vision of a National Democratic Society. The ANC's draft resolution on economic transformation also envisages "a mixed economy" in which "the state, private capital, cooperative and other forms of social ownership complement each other in an integrated way to eliminate poverty and foster shared economic growth"<sup>2</sup> The main point of divergence appears to be the relative strength of public versus private capital. In the "socialist" mixed-economy the state and social

capital is 'dominant and hegemonic' whereas the in the "national democratic" mixed-economy "the private sector is the main engine of investment, growth and employment creation" even though "the state plays a decisive role in shaping economic development."<sup>3</sup>

So the ANC sees the private sector as the main agent of accumulation and the state's role is to structure and regulate accumulation and redistribute part of the surplus it generates. The SACP would rather see a much greater substitution of public for private capital in the accumulation process. In either case, however, we are still talking about the accumulation of capital in a (capitalist) mixed-economy, or at least the SACP programme offers nothing to the contrary.

As such there is little of great consequence that separates the end-point of the SACP's maximum programme from the minimum programme it shares with the ANC. Indeed, aside from it's the rhetorical (but untheorized) preface about a transition to a 'classless society', the vision of socialism proposed by SARS is not significantly different from the principles underpinning the programmes of most European social democratic parties.

This approach can be contrasted with the 1989 programme of the SACP, *the Path to Power*. Here the transition to socialism was conceived as directly and inextricably linked to seizure of state power by the working class in a socialist revolution: "A socialist revolution differs from all other revolutions in world history. It sets out to abolish private ownership of the means of production and

1. SACP (2007): *The South African Road to Socialism*, Bua Komanisi, Volume 6, Issue 2, June 2007, p22.

2. ANC (2007): Draft Resolution on Economic Transformation, National Policy Conference, point 5(e)

3. ANC (2007): Economic Transformation for a National Democratic Society, a discussion document, point 58

all forms of oppression. The systems of slavery, feudalism and capitalism are all based on the private ownership of the means of production and oppression of one class by another. Thus, capitalist relations of production developed even before the bourgeoisie had achieved political power. *But the development of socialist relations, which will bring an end to the system of economic exploitation, cannot begin until the working class and its allies have won state power.* While the material basis for socialism is created by capitalism itself, socialist relations of production are realised only after the political revolution.

*The fundamental question of any socialist revolution is the winning of political power by the working class, in alliance with other progressive elements among the people. The working class then sets out to eliminate exploitation by achieving public ownership and democratic control of the means of production. Fundamental to the socialist political system is the introduction of the widest democracy to the greatest majority of the people and the elimination of all forms of discrimination, including national oppression and sex discrimination. At the same time, the workers' state should prevent the resurgence of the overthrown classes, both internal and external.*"<sup>4</sup>

Of course, shortly after the SACP adopted the Path to Power, the Berlin wall was pushed over by dissatisfied citizens of the GDR. This event - and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the world Marxist-Leninist movement - initiated a widespread debate amongst socialists and communists, a debate in which the SACP and its cadres played a leading role.

4. SACP (1989): *The Path to Power*, emphasis added

5. Andre Gorz (1994): *Capitalism, Socialism, Economy*, Verso, p38

For some socialists these events meant that "the concept of 'scientific socialism' has lost all meaning"<sup>5</sup>. For the SACP the debate culminated in a recommitment to 'scientific' Marxism-Leninism and an assertion that socialism, being inherently democratic, required no further qualifications, for example by re-inventing the Party's objective in terms like 'democratic socialism' or 'social democracy'. The concept of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was rejected, and the slogan "Socialism is the Future, Build it Now!" was proudly asserted as the lodestar of a mass-based vanguard party.

Listening to some SACP members today, one gets the strong impression that all of this has been entirely forgotten. In place of a renewed Marxism ready for battle on the terrain of twenty first century capitalism, we have a reversion to the habits of sclerotic Marxism-Leninism – the characteristic ideology of stagnating Soviet socialism. Instead of boldly confronting the questions posed anew by contemporary developments in global and national capitalism, we have a regression to the ideology and practice of a bygone era.

For example, in the context of the state power debate delegates made frequent statements to the effect that "our participation in parliamentary elections is not an end in itself but a tactic to educate the masses about the futility of bourgeois democracy". Others contend that it is time to revive the Party underground and begin clandestine work in the armed forces with a view to the inevitable seizure of power. Similar insurrectionary sentiments were expressed by comrade Buti Manamela, who enthusiastically told the plenary session that "We are ready to take power, whether through the ballot or through the barrel of a gun!"

**Scientific socialism or confessions of faith?**

The outcome of the debates of the early 1990s, in the form of the slogan “Socialism is the Future – Build it Now”, marked a clear departure with the earlier view that “the development of socialist relations cannot begin until the working class and its allies have won state power”. But it appears that this departure has not been thoroughly internalised within Party ranks.

Today, two interpretations of the meaning of this slogan appear to co-exist amongst Party members. The first can be characterised as “Socialism is the Future – Build Working Class Power Now!” The task of the party is to build the hegemony of the proletariat on the terrain of the NDR with a view to a future seizure of power at which time the proletariat will smash the bourgeois state, expropriate the bourgeoisie and embark on a path of socialist construction. This approach seeks to reconcile current practice with the SACP’s 1989 programme, although power is now conceived of (in Gramscian terms) as extending beyond the state to include workplaces, ‘communities’ and ‘the economy’.

A second interpretation could be styled “Socialism is the Future – Make Socialistic Reforms Now!” Here the SACP’s main task is to advocate for a more worker-friendly form of capitalism whilst organising workers into socialistic forms of economic association, such as cooperatives. This means campaigning for a ‘socialist-oriented NDR’ which begins to roll back the market and expand the hegemony and dominance of the state and non-profit sectors on the terrain of capitalism. The hope is that incremental reforms will open the path to further working class advance, and that the NDR will consequently develop into a socialist revolution.

From the point of view of a transition to socialism neither of these approaches is necessarily wrong. Moreover, they are not nec-

essarily in contradiction since it can be argued that socialistic reforms are required precisely to building working class power, and that the gathering hegemony of working class power will generate socialistic reforms. However, whilst both interpretations are eloquent about how we should build socialism now, neither engages with the meaning of a socialist future and how the tasks of the present relate to the objective of transcending capitalism.

Perhaps this apparent vacuum of socialist thought arises because the issues involved are taken for granted, having been settled long ago. No doubt all the members of the party agree that the socialist mixed economy is merely “a transitional social system between capitalism and a fully classless, communist society”. But does this assertion have any scientific content, or is it simply a moral argument about the certainty of a utopian future? Is it based on a careful analysis of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism or is it merely a confession of faith? If it is the former this is nowhere evident in the SACP’s programme or in the documents adopted at the 12th congress.

Perhaps, then, there is another explanation for the SACP’s lack of debate about socialism. Perhaps such a debate would raise too many uncomfortable questions to which unifying answers could not be posed. In particular, it may be that the conclusions of such a discussion would risk the explicit recognition that ‘scientific’ Marxism-Leninism has lost all meaning for the Party and reveal the extent to which many of its cadres are actually in favour of a social democratic compromise with capital.

Revolutionary communism is founded on the belief that socialism constitutes a higher mode of production that will supersede capitalism on a global scale as a consequence of the fact that it is superior to capitalism eco-

nominally (in terms of technological and material development), socially (in terms of the conditions of life of humanity) and politically (in terms of the democratic self-determination of people). Moreover, this belief is based on the claim that a scientific analysis of contemporary capitalism reveals such a transition to be inexorable and (in the view of some) imminent. For Marxist-Leninists, therefore, communism constitutes the inevitable end of history.

In contrast, social democrats would largely agree with Fukuyama's view that the 'End of History' has already arrived, and with the assertion that 'scientific socialism' has lost all meaning. For them, there is no new mode of production waiting to be born in the fires of proletarian revolution having been conceived in the minds of revolutionary communists, scientifically or otherwise. Consequently, the struggle of the working class – especially where it has access to the option of a democratic mandate – is to improve the economic, social and political conditions within the framework of the current mode of production; to reform capitalism until it becomes 'socialism', in the sense that the logic of the market is effectively tempered by the rational will of a democratic state accountable to the working class.

Since the SACP programme offers no reasoned explanation of how a "socialist mixed economy" will lead to the creation of a "fully classless, communist society" the SACP's approach to communism is purely utopian. Consequently, despite its rhetorical commitment to Marxism-Leninism, the Party's approach to a socialist mixed-economy is entirely social democratic.

#### **The Road to socialism or the Road to Limpopo?**

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6. SACP (2007): Composite Resolution on the SACP and State Power, 12th National Congress Resolutions

We noted above that the 1989 programme of the party established a direct link between the working class seizure of state power and the transition to socialism. In current debates, however, the question of 'State Power' is entirely divorced from the question of socialism. The short chapter on socialism in SARS is followed by a much longer chapter on state power, which does not mention socialism once. The resolution of the 12th Congress on 'the SACP and State Power' is also silent on the question of socialism. Instead, it is motivated by concern that "the structures of the SACP and our cadres have confronted many problems with the way in which the Alliance has often functioned, particularly with regard to policy making, the lack of joint programmes on the ground, deployments and electoral list processes."<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the debate inevitably boils down to the simple question of whether the SACP should continue to give support to the ANC in the form of a strategic Alliance or establish itself as a social democratic opposition party. Some believe the best approach is to encourage the ANC to implement social democratic reform by remaining in a reconfigured Alliance which can emerge from heightened working class activism within the ANC – *siyaya eLimpopo*. Others are of the view that the SACP would do a much better job of implementing the same social democratic programme itself – *kungcono silithathe*.

The second approach is obviously inconsistent with the continuation of a strategic Alliance between the SACP and the ANC. They would become opponents in the electoral process contending for the same constituency. The possibility would still exist of continued collaboration between the two, either through some form of electoral pact, or in the context of a coalition government. In either case the strategic Alliance is re-

placed with tactical cooperation on specific programmes.

But if the SACP has no maximum programme which is significantly different from the ANC's then even the first approach – of a reconfigured Alliance – will lead to a growing tendency to regard the Alliance as a tactical device rather than a strategic necessity in the struggle for socialism.

In opening the Policy Conference of the ANC, the President said: "I must restate some of the fundamental conclusions that have informed the functioning of the broad movement for national liberation for many decades... One of these conclusions is that there is a distinct, material and historically determined difference between the national democratic and the socialist revolutions. Objectively, and not by proclamation or conference resolutions, the ANC necessarily serves as the leader of the forces committed to the victory of the National Democratic Revolution, which struggle for the realisation of the national democratic goals of the masses of our people..."

Equally, the ANC would respect the right and duty of our ally, the South African Communist Party, to lead the struggle for the victory of the socialist revolution. Our movement has never stopped or discouraged the SACP from playing this role, and will not do so today or tomorrow...

In this context, the SACP has always understood that it could not delegate its socialist tasks to the ANC, consistent with the fact that the tasks of the socialist revolution could not be delegated to the National Democratic Revolution. For many decades, the SACP has therefore not seen and acted against the ANC as its political competitor, which we are not."<sup>7</sup>

In saying so, the President has in mind a revolutionary communist party, with a clear vision of transition to socialism such as that

identified by the 1989 programme of the SACP. But if the difference between 'socialism' and 'national democracy' amounts only to a question of emphasis on the nature of the capitalist mixed-economy, then there can be no "distinct, material and historically determined difference between the national democratic and the socialist revolutions". Consequently, there is no objective basis on which to differentiate between 'socialist tasks' and the 'national democratic tasks'. If this is so, why should the ANC continue to lead the Alliance? The SACP might as well do so itself.

In such a case we might characterise the SACP as a Left social democratic party in Alliance with the ANC, which is a more centre-left social democratic movement. Here, we do not have a strategic Alliance founded on two distinct but interconnected revolutionary streams (socialism and national democracy). Instead we have an uncomfortable coalition of two social democratic parties, each of whom vie for the mantle of leadership, but only one of whom actually places its programme before the electorate.

### Three choices

These conclusions leave the SACP with three choices. First it could stand for election on its own, advancing an independent, left social democratic platform to become an opposition party to the ANC, thus ending the strategic Alliance in favour of tactical cooperation on selected issues. Second, it could accept the ANC's bona fides as the leading and most popular social democratic formation in South Africa and continue to participate in strengthening the ANC in the context of a reconfigured Alliance. Third, the

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7. Address of the President of the African National Congress, Thabo Mbeki, at the Opening Session of the ANC Policy Conference, 27 June 2007, Gallagher Estate, Midrand

SACP could renew its commitment to revolutionary communism.

The first option appears to be the preference of many (perhaps most) in the SACP, including those who wish to 'seize power with the ballot or the bullet'. Assuming that this resulted in an SACP assumption to power, whether alone or in coalition with other parties (including most probably the ANC), the realities faced in government by all mass-based, left parties in the context of capitalist globalisation would also face the SACP. These realities would generate exactly the kinds of strains and challenges that have characterised the ANC's period in government.

If the current debates within the SACP are any guide, this would result in a new round of frustration, and new 'angry voices' would emerge to further fragment the SACP. The most likely end-point is not socialism, but a group of fragmented set of left splinters, all vying for the mantle of the SACP's proud historical legacy.

The second option of a reconfigured Alliance is difficult to sustain because, if the ANC and the SACP are both social democratic parties, one professing to be 'to the left' of the other, the question of merging the two (or liquidating one) will increasingly come to the fore. To avoid such a fate the debate about a reconfigured Alliance would need to go beyond consideration of the way the parties relate to each other and look also at the mission of the SACP, its structure (in the form of a mass party) and its specific role, distinct from that of the ANC, in supporting and advancing the NDR. In other words, the reconfigured Alliance is not something that the ANC is called upon to generously bestow on its communist ally, but emerges from a clear and thoroughgoing transforma-

tion of the SACP itself.

The third option is to revitalise the SACP's commitment to revolutionary communism with a view to reconfiguring the strategic Alliance on the basis of a renewed understanding of the "distinct, material and historically determined difference between the national democratic and the socialist revolutions". This option is perhaps the most difficult. It requires going back to basic principles with a willingness to think outside the tattered box of Soviet socialism. It means reviving the debates of the 1990s and asking if they were genuinely resolved in terms of a new revolutionary project, or swept under the carpet in favour of tacit but unspoken social democratic conclusion.

If this is so, and if the SACP is a actually a reformist social democratic party clothed in the threadbare drag of Marxism-Leninism, it may be better for the Party to come out of the closet, confront itself in the mirror, and admit that its creed is not revolutionary communism but ordinary reformist social democracy.

While difficult and painful, such a self-confession would at least clear the clouds that currently obscure so much of the 'State Power' debate, opening the way for a credible SACP electoral challenge. Perhaps on this basis too we could return to the second option, and a more sober and enduring relationship of mutual trust and support can be built in the context of a genuinely reconfigured strategic Alliance, premised on distinct roles in the common struggle for social democratic reform of twenty-first century capitalism. ★

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