



SACP 5th Special National Congress, December 2024

Discussion Documents

Chapter 9: The SACP and the youth: An abstract

“The youth does not occupy a special perch outside its social environment. It is very much part of society. It mirrors the ramifications of the society within which it lives; it shares class and group loyalties; it engages in struggles for the realisation and defence of concrete social ideals and interests. Just as in class societies we have divisions into the haves and have-nots, owners of small enterprises and small plots of land, intellectuals and so on – we do have similar social gradations among the youth: working youth, students, peasants, petty bourgeoisie, intellectuals, exploiters.”

...

“The stage of youth is one of assimilating knowledge of all kinds. Avidly searching for a rational understanding of the surrounding world, the youth therefore displays curiosity, rebelliousness, impassioned and uncontrolled enthusiasms; it quickly forms judgements as it abandons others. Such a stage is crucial in the moulding of stable social being; thus all classes and strata wage relentless battles for the hearts and minds of the youth.”

– **African National Congress** (16 June 1985) “Role and Place of the Youth in Society, the ANC and the Struggle”. Kabwe, Zambia: 2nd National Consultative Conference.

Why should we have this discussion?

The SACP strategic slogan, *Socialism is the future: Build it Now* can only find historical significance and endurance if it finds profound expression and practical elaboration among the youth. The re-establishment of the Young Communist League of South Africa in 2003, one of the most important decisions of the SACP since its unbanning, was to complement an already youthful SACP, with many of its provincial secretaries being under the age of 35. This decision was important as it brought the SACP closer to a cohort of young people it would not have otherwise reached directly. However, this does not mean that the SACP should cease to attract young talent directly into its ranks, and not through the YCLSA. As the SACP states in its programme, the “South African Road to Socialism”,

“The majority and the bedrock of the Part’s membership must be largely, though not exclusively, drawn from the ranks of organised workers, whilst at the same time recruiting from other strata of the workers and the (urban and rural) poor, as well as from youth...”

As the programme further states,

“All SACP structures must actively foster, build and strengthen our Young Communist League (YCL) by ensuring that it has branches in all the areas where the Party is organised and that it is adequately resourced. This must be seen as part of the self-sufficiency of the SACP as a whole.

“The YCL must be strengthened to prioritise the organisation and communist education of all sections of youth with particular attention being paid to young workers, students, professionals, and marginalised and unemployed youth. One of the biggest challenges facing our country is to address the needs of the youth, and one of the best ways to do this is to challenge the influence of capitalist ideology, tenderpreneurship, drugs and alcohol abuse amongst the youth. The core of the YCL organisation must be young workers, students and unemployed youth? The YCL must be strengthened to undertake ideological work...”

Over and above re-establishing the YCL in 2003, the SACP clarified its own role in the programme:

“However, much as the SACP must seek to strengthen the YCL to be the leading communist formation on matters relating to young people, the SACP itself must empower its structures to deal with youth matters as the overwhelming majority of our membership is young. Our approach must be that the YCL must serve as a preparatory school for the SACP.”

The aim of this document is to articulate how the SACP should relate to, and complement the work done by the YCLSA around youth. It will also make some proposals on programmes and campaigns, organisational design and ideological work that will help the SACP better communicate directly with young people.

Who are we talking about?

The challenges in the other SACP Special National Congress discussion documents and in other sections of this document mostly affect young people. These challenges include the interrelated crises of unemployment, poverty and inequality, as well as healthcare, education and other human development challenges.

Young people endure the brunt of capitalism and neo-liberal policy failures. Although their challenges seem peculiar, and may range from age groups, race and gender, at the genesis of all these is the capitalist system, its failures and crises. The challenges facing the youth can be categorised into economic, political, social, ideological, organisational, and so on, including the capitalist system turning youth into “zombie consumers”. The reality is that these challenges straddle within each other, are interrelated. A vanguard party and its league must produce and provide class leadership and mobilise the youth against the system while seeking immediate solutions to meet the needs of the youth.

Already, there is a consensus around the need for a popular left front, but this discussion should also include the role that the SACP, inclusive of the Young Communist League, should play in a popular youth front and forging a popular youth front movement as an integral part of the broader popular left front.

Without going deeper into the character of youth, it is important to note the link between youth politics and culture, and the role that culture plays. This platform has seen both artist and audience get

mesmerised by the power of challenging political authority and expressing disgust against its excesses, mainly through culture. It is partly because traditional political parties have become an echo chamber, repeating and believing in their truths whilst a different and silent political revolution is brewing on the sidelines. The reverse in the electoral fortunes of the ANC, for instance, was not by people who came out in placards expressing their disgust, but by people across all social and class sections, notably including the youth, who were using various platforms but were never heard. An even higher number of chose to stay away from the polls, and essentially 'decoupling' from that form of party (*and*) electoralist party-politics.

The same applies on campuses, if we look at the turnout of the SRC elections. But other young people have also stayed away from trade-unions, from collectivism, retreating into individualism, and have somewhat into a "virtual world" world as well. Hardly do we see "real-world" organisation of struggles around, among others, food prices, petrol prices, mortgage prices, bank fraud, electricity cuts, water shortage, rape, femicide, unemployment, access to health or education. These protests, however, are happening, virtually. Through virtual platforms (unknown for how long and may only be a sample of what is bubbling beneath), we can see this virtual retreat that thrives on individual victories supported by *reposts* (which is a form of collective action, however). This has implications for how we communicate and organise the youth, in particular.

What should be the role of the SACP

Given the above, the role of the SACP (and inevitably that of the YCLSA) should be to create a harmonic relationship between these apparently compartmentalised struggles that young people face, so that they, in one tune, proclaim, "Socialism is The Future: Build it Now". Below we explore some of these and make some suggestions of *What is to be Done?*

1. Organisational Design

This may be easier said than done, but the SACP's organisational design has to be more welcoming of young people, over and above having their own YCLSA. This means that youth related issues, especially around political and economic exclusion, should be articulated in the manner that young people understand and are responsive to – but this exclusion has to be clearly explained and theorised. This means that young people should see both the SACP and the YCLSA as a political home. The organisational report reflects on various categories of the Party's membership. In short, the youth remain significant in the Party.

The Party Building Commission should consider *constituting a Youth Unit convened by a PB member and the YCLSA* and *comprising youth formations* representing the various strata of youth from workers, unemployed, students and civil society.

There should be targeted national and intentional work focusing on youth-related issues to help party organisations in responding to youth related issues. This unit should report to the PBC periodically on its work. This unit can also constitute the initial base for a youth front. At all levels of the SACP, this unit should ensure that we have parallel active and vibrant YCLSA structures. It has been established that where there are strong party structures, consequently, there are also strong SACP structures.

2. Battle of Ideas

Young people are innovative, from forms of protest to forms of music, politics or culture. These innovations, however, modernised from the old. Just as earlier generations of SASO- and SASCO-inspired the “*Fees Must Fall Movement*”, the ‘Kwaito’ and House generations have inspired “*amapiano*” and so on. We have to find ways of reaching out as the SACP to these young people to build maximum identification with the SACP as the home of the progressives, left, socialist and communist youth. The absence of a progressive left voice (or a weak one for that matter) among the youth during the last elections is indicative of a void that exists that needs to be filled by the SACP as well as the Young Communist League. This ranges from SACP views (not just the ones seen opposing/differing with the ANC, but the ones that place the left, socialist and communist agenda to the front and centre) to the organisational presence of the SACP amongst the working class and poor youth of our country. We need a more organised left voice that speaks for the youth and complements the work done by the YCLSA. This should take place in the Progressive Youth Alliance as well.

The SACP should consider an Annual Marxist Youth and Culture Festival. This should be targeted at exposing the ideas of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and other communist revolutionaries and social scientists to South African youth, fusing the classical with modern youth politics and culture. This festivity should place Marxism at the centre of youth debates and engagements. Many communist formations internationally have similar events, tied to both local and international issues. This could also be a fresher approach to political education and public left, socialist and communist discourse that will contribute to the building and strengthening the vanguard character of the SACP. We should show that communist politics are exciting, creative, innovative, vibrant, versatile and are rooted in working-class culture and politics.

SACP publications, especially *Umsebenzi* and the *African Communist*, should be open for young creatives communists who are well trained technically and ideologically sharp to contribute. This must not only be done in word, but young people must be given the technical abilities and ideological training to help them take advantage of publishing within the SACP. Many a YCL’ers were recruited into the SACP through party publications, first as distributors and then as the heart of an activist party publication.

Before the YCLSA, the SACP targeted students and academics active in the progressive youth movement to become party activists through consistent and focused political education. This is no longer done with the energy it used to be in the 1990s. Many of the SACP functionaries and subsequent YCLSA leaders came from this corp. This has to be resuscitated jointly with the YCLSA Political Education Unit.

The need for a core of young people to contribute to the SACP media, communication and information work is more urgent than ever. With this process, we should understand that there will be those who join in not for the long road; but a team such as we had briefly during elections comprising young people skilled in digital media, layout and design, podcasts, photography, writing, editing, videography and so on gave the party an edge in sending messages timely as demanded by the technological developments in the world of communications. Through this process, we could produce posters, leaflets, short video clips, professionally edited pictures and statements and many more, engendering excitement in the agitation and propagation of the socialist revolution. We need a reorganisation of our socialist agitation and propagation machinery to ensure that it is more effective, properly staffed, including with volunteers, and is able to, under the political guidance of the Media, Communication and Information Department (MCID), communicate timely and effectively party messages.

3. SACP Campaigns/Youth Sectoral Work

Our SACP Campaigns should reflect on the needs, interests and aspiration of young people, beyond those articulated by the YCLSA. This should be in broader areas, such as land, the financial sector, the state, workplace-based struggles, arts and culture. The nature and design of these campaigns should reflect the critical issues that affect young people and make the SACP their platform for addressing such. Party campaigns could be one of the ways in which we can mobilise young people back into left and progressive politics.