Sixty Writing, Fighting Years
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This year the African Communist (AC) celebrates 60 unbroken years of continuous publication. Under any circumstances this would have been a remarkable achievement. But the circumstances of these six decades were particularly challenging for an official organ of the South African Communist Party.

The 60 years of the AC span the underground years; the massive mid-1960s setback for the liberation movement in South Africa, when it suffered a near fatal smashing at the hands of apartheid repression; long years of widely dispersed exile; the challenges of mounting and sustaining an armed struggle from afar; growing popular resistance and mobilisation at home; the democratic transition (at once, a popular victory but also a deeply complex and often confusing process); and finally the many challenges and consequences of assuming governance responsibilities in a capitalist-dominated society and world. Across these decades, sometimes playing a leading theoretical role, sometimes ideologically adrift itself, the AC has sought to provide, in collective debate, a clear Marxist analysis of South African, regional, and global realities.

At the outset the AC saw itself as part of an internationalist movement of communist and workers’ parties, with particular South African and African responsibilities. Viewed from this perspective, the 60 years of the AC might be divided roughly into four quarters or phases – each with its own paradoxes.

Internationally, the first phase is book-ended by two major events – the January 1959 victory of the Cuban revolution and the April 1975 fall of Saigon and the hurried retreat of US imperialism from Vietnam.
The paradox for South African revolutionaries and for the AC was that, despite early hopes reflected in the first issues of AC, while the forces of socialism and national liberation, supported by a seemingly impregnable Soviet bloc, were advancing globally, here in South Africa we appeared to be going backwards.

But by the mid-1970s there was to be a sudden unblocking of the tide of popular advances in our part of the continent. This marked what we might regard as a second phase in the AC’s life. In part this unblocking was triggered by a major development elsewhere – not in the global South, but in the South of the global North, as it were: in Portugal, the weakest link at that time in the global colonial/imperialist chain. This was the April 1974 radical Portuguese military officers overthrow of the long-standing right-wing regime in Lisbon, supported by a popular uprising in which the underground Portuguese Communist Party (still an important factor in that country’s democracy) played a leading role. These developments in Portugal were directly influenced by the frustrating experience of an increasingly sullen Portuguese army bogged down in distant and morally indefensible wars against national liberation movements in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde and East Timor. In turn, the Portuguese “Carnation Revolution” in the metropolis opened rapid prospects for liberation in those colonies. The SACP had long enjoyed close fraternal relations with the PCP and with the leaderships of the MPLA, Frelimo, and PAIGC – and the pages of the AC carried many important analyses, interviews and reflections on these critical developments.

But the beginnings of the second quarter in the AC’s life (mid-1970s to 1989) can also be said to be marked by domestic events – the 1973 Durban worker strikes and, especially, the 1976 student and youth uprisings. These were to spark rolling waves of sustained popular and working-class semi-insurrectionary mass struggles that lasted into the
late-80s and early 90s.

But here was the paradox of this period. As revolutionary struggles gathered momentum in South Africa, the Soviet bloc, upon which the SACP and the AC had pinned strategic hopes, entered into a period of profound economic, political and social stagnation. If this decade-and-a-half of the AC’s existence is symbolically marked by the ending of Portuguese colonialism and by Soweto 1976 – then its end is framed by the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the (largely peaceful) unravelling of the Soviet bloc.

All of this, in turn, produced another set of paradoxes. The disappearance of the Soviet Union meant that the imperialist world, led by the US, no longer saw white minority rule in South Africa as an important (if embarrassing) local gendarme in a now disappeared Cold War. Imperialist pressure mounted on the apartheid regime to negotiate with the ANC. A global loss for the left created uncertain but real, nonetheless, political opportunities for local revolutionary forces.

However, the dramatic collapse of the Soviet Union and its wider bloc also resulted in massive disorientation and demoralisation in what, back in 1959, had been seen by the AC as a formidable international fortress of communist and workers’ parties. The CPSU was dissolved by decree, top-down, by its general secretary, Gorbachev, unmandated by any congress or democratic process. In Western Europe once extremely powerful communist parties, in the case of the Italian PCI enjoying at one time nearly 40% of the democratic vote and controlling hundreds of municipalities, abandoned the name “communist” and fragmented.

Here was the next paradox in the life of the AC. At very time that the tide was turning one way globally, in South Africa the SACP emerged from the underground as a hugely popular formation, with its soon to be elected new general secretary, Cde Chris Hani, easily the second
most popular politician (after Nelson Mandela, of course) in our country. Hani was also widely renowned internationally. Rank-and-file unionists in India, for instance, referred to this “great revolutionary” as Cde Krish. The defeat of white minority rule and the ANC Alliance’s overwhelming 62% election victory in 1994 meant that, for a time, the SACP was carrying the red flag and bearing the name “communist”, not just for itself but internationally, when globally the traffic seemed to be going in the opposite direction.

In the early and mid-1990s the SACP and its publications were avidly read locally, but also translated and debated in left-circles around the world. The AC well understood that it had a responsibility, not just in navigating the tricky South African transitional process, but in the difficult task of international global left renewal. Left intellectuals from our region, but also Nicaragua, the Philippines, North America, Australia, Russia and elsewhere actively contributed to debates within the AC. In this period the AC also opened its pages to a wider array of Marxist thinkers, including Trotskyist doyen Ernest Mandel, for instance.

While the local commercial media presented the SACP as a global “anachronism”, a “dinosaur from a previous epoch”, locally and in many left circles internationally, high hopes and expectations were placed on the SACP and on the South African revolution. Sometimes these hopes and expectations, which we in the SACP often shared, were unrealistic. The greatest African Marxist theorist of our time, Samir Amin – while fully supporting both “in detail and in substance” (as he once put it) - the programmatic perspective of the SACP in the mid-1990s, warned us and our sometimes over-enthusiastic international supporters of the “fragility” of our situation. It was a global reality dominated now by a triumphal, US unipolar domination.

By the early 2000s the shine was clearly beginning to wear off the aura of the South African revolution in many global left circles. This
was due partly to the objective obstacles confronting deepening the radicalisation of our revolution, but it was also due to serious errors from within our movement. Attention began to shift to important left advances in Latin America, for instance.

If we were to delineate a fourth phase in the AC’s 60-year journey, then we might mark its beginning as the 2007 ANC Polokwane national conference, in which a partial blow against local neoliberalism in the ANC-led government and movement degenerated into a full-blown state capture project. On the global front, this fourth phase might be typified by the onset of the 2008 Great Recession marking late-neoliberalism’s deepening crisis. But 2008 going forward has also exposed the anti-capitalist and progressive forces, not as absent, but as fragmented and dispersed. We have collectively not been able to transform this great crisis of capitalism into a crisis for capitalism.

This is the broad context that now challenges the SACP and its 60-year old organ, the AC. Who is the AC for? In the 1980s a hungry AC readership desperately sought to lay hands on to a passed-around copy. Do we now have the inverse – AC copies in the uncertain search for a readership? And who is that readership, actually and potentially? Is it the Party’s 300 000 strong membership? Or a much narrower leading Party cadreship? And what about non-Party cadres across the movement and beyond, many hungry for serious (and often absent) debate? And what about the SACP congress resolutions to help build a left progressive front, what role for the AC in that respect?

These and other challenges are posed to the AC in the articles published in this issue. Most of the articles are from papers delivered to the AC 60th anniversary commemoration, held in October at the Liliesleaf Rivonia museum, appropriately the former headquarters of the ANC/SACP underground.
60 FIGHTING YEARS

The African Communist’s six-decade journey

Blade Nzimande recounts the six-decade journey of the SACP and its theoretical journal, arguing that a fighting SACP must continue to be a writing SACP.

This is truly a historic occasion in the history of our Party, because in celebrating the African Communist (AC) we are celebrating the ideological and educational role of the AC, and its political contribution in the struggle against “colonialism of a special type” – a phrase you will find often clarified and debated in the journal over the years and used throughout the life of the journal. We are also celebrating and reminding ourselves of the role of the SACP in progressive and alternative media. It is very important to celebrate this too. Sometimes we argue with some in the commercial media that the reason why we often feel very strongly about the wrongs they commit is because we, as the Communist Party, can claim that not only do we have a long history in progressive media, but we fought for it, including for the very space that we have today.

Of course, the AC has been one of many other journals that, historically, the Party has been associated with. These publications include our very own Umsebenzi, which was renamed in the 1930s, having been The Worker before that.

Other publications, not formally Party titles but in which communists played an important role, included the Spark. I am afraid to men-
tion *The New Age*, although in this regard we have a huge struggle to try and reclaim this glorious publication title, given what in the post-1994 period, was paraded in the name of *The New Age* as a progressive media outlet when in fact it became an instrument of the parasitic networks of state capture.

It is also important that, as we tell the history of the AC, we remind ourselves of the historical context in which it was born in October 1959. I must declare that, at the time, I was just one year old.

When the AC was launched in October 1959 there was no public gathering because the SACP was deep in the underground. One can locate the history of the AC by going back to the fact that when the apartheid regime came into power in 1948, the very first piece of legislation that it passed was the Suppression of Communism Act [of 1950], aimed at banning the Party. The Party, of course, in its wisdom, but not without a heavy internal debate, decided to dissolve itself before the passage of that legislation and thereafter, in 1953, reorganised itself underground. There were big debates. Some were disagreeing with the Party leadership at the time on the tactical dissolution, viewing it rather as a strategic decision. It is said that Michael Harmel (pseudonym A Lerumo) was among those who argued against the self-dissolution to call the bluff of the apartheid regime, but that that argument was defeated at the last Central Committee of the then CPSA.

The debate nevertheless continued as an underground discourse until 1953 on whether the Communist Party should be reconstituted underground as it was now an illegal organisation. Before its banning the Party had been known as the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). It was during its underground reconstitution that it adopted its current name, the SACP. Before he passed away, Cde Ahmed Kathrada insisted that the reconstitution took place at the back of an Indian-owned shop somewhere in Ekurhuleni. As part of the task of retracing our history,
me must retrace this detail – just as we identified the site of the founding congress of the Party in 1921.

One of the big debates after the reconstitution of the SACP, inside the Party, was whether to publicly announce that the Party had reconstituted itself. That, of course, to many communists would have been an act of defiance, to tell the apartheid regime that they were not going to get rid of communists: “you have banned us but we have reconstituted ourselves in the underground”.

However, this became a tricky issue in the Party, because there was concern within the ranks of our structures in the underground, that, by announcing that the communist party had reconstituted itself in the underground, the Party would negatively affect participation of communists in the then legal organisations. There was also concern over how communists would be seen in the ANC, then still legal, and the trade union movement, which was also largely legal, in what became the Congress Alliance in the 1950s. Were communists not then going to be regarded as a secret cabal that took decisions underground and tried to impose its direction on legal formations? This is a good example of how, throughout its existence, the Party has been concerned about the unity of the movement.

The ongoing debate was partly resolved in the late 1950s. It was within this context that a compromise was reached, that at least there should be a journal, or magazine as it was called then. A paragraph in the first edition read: “This magazine has been started by a group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa.” This was deliberate because the Party did not want the journal to be associated with its existence in the light of the internal debates whether to announce the continuing existence of the Communist Party publicly. Of course it was not just any group that started the AC; it was the underground structures of the SACP. That is the context in which the AC arose.
Yes, as the President Ramaphosa has said in his message: we still believe today that our continent needs Marxist ideas, even more today perhaps than even at that time, given the enormous political, social and economic challenges facing the continent.

**Sixty years on**

We are proud that 60 years later we are still producing the AC. At this time we must recall many comrades who played a role in the development of the AC. It is also proper that we remember the founding editor, Michael (Mick) Harmel. He passed away in 1974 – the year, incidentally, in which I was completing Grade 11 in Pietermaritzburg. He is credited as the main drafter of the *Road to South African Freedom*. He died in Prague. I am pleased that the SACP will produce a plaque in honour of the founding editor of the AC, who was replaced by Essop Pahad after his death in serving on *The World Marxist Review* with its office in Prague.

We are proud that one of the national orders has been conferred, posthumously, on Cde Harmel, to recognise and celebrate his role as a Party leader.

Many other comrades will speak with much more authority, that since its founding, the AC played many important roles, not a single role.

The University of Natal has digitised the issues of the AC. You can now read every *African Communist* from 1959. We have committed ourselves at the Party headquarters to continue to make the AC available electronically, digitise it and going forward, also make it available on digital platforms.

It is not a mistake that we are meeting here today. Liliesleaf Farm is now officially hosting the Party archives, including the AC.

The AC has played a very important role as an educator, a recruiter, a
platform for theoretical engagements, and so on. Many comrades who may not have been members of the Party ended up being members because of the influence of the AC.

The AC also promoted internationalism. Cadres were reading it to understand what was happening in South Africa, in the region, in the continent and of course across the world.

Indeed, we do have challenges in terms of soliciting more types of articles and emphasis in order to take the AC forward in a way that deepens its historical role.

The Party has come up with a very important concept. We would like comrades to write on the concept of the crisis of social reproduction, a crucial concept in understanding, among others, what we often call xenophobia. Migration patterns largely reflect the economic patterns in the region, but also this crisis.

We also need to further the analysis of gender struggles, including on the crucial aspect of combating gender abuse. Also, issues related to the environment, among others. I am reading a book by a Swedish Marxist on the environment. He argues that it is not fossil fuels that have caused climate change, but capitalist uses of fossil fuels that has led to global warming.

It is going to be important that we solicit more contributions, encourage more researched-based articles and also to use technology to significantly expand the reach of the AC today and also encourage a broader progressive readership.

The Party is speaking about political fronts today. We need to foster the growth of literature on the question of fronts, and the AC can play an important role in driving the programme.

Most importantly, we really need to take forward in AC the debates on the economy in the current period.

I must admit that the first time I managed to read and understand
the AC was on my first trip overseas as an intern, having embraced Marxism in 1980 as an honours student.

I joined the board of the *South African Labour Bulletin* in 1984. I started receiving copies of the AC – delivered under my door. Some of those, if I remember well, were covered in covers of wildlife magazines. The Party made its ideological presence felt.

Cde Pahad says that they wanted to recruit me at the time, but they thought that I was a workerist as I was on the board of the *Labour Bulletin*.

Some of the erstwhile workerists, by the way, have become very big capitalists who had, in the 80s, hated the ANC like nobody’s business. Today they are benefitting handsomely from the capitalist dispensation with the ANC as government. I won’t mention names. Some of you know that they did not want the ANC at all, dismissing it as an African bourgeois organisation. Today they are capitalists, working for companies that are exploiting workers.

I became a regular visitor from 1986 when I was invited by Ibbo Mandaza to the annual *Southern African Political Economy Series* (SAPES) conference in Zimbabwe. I used to go to Grassroots Bookshop in Harare. We would read the AC and *Sechaba* like nobody’s business, and even carried them home through Air Zimbabwe to Johannesburg airport and leave them in the aeroplane because we could not take them with us.

I must say though, like others, one gained a lot from this but also sometimes felt that some of the articles were a little bit too rigid, like typical classical Soviet Marxism, and in some instances were very dry.

One of the exciting moments was when my name gained entry into the AC in the 1990s. I think it was a debate on civil society with Mpume Sikhosana, and later on our debates on the negotiations. It was a wonderful moment, historic because one had always wanted to write in and
for the AC.

Let me end by thanking the comrades who have actually carried the AC, especially after 1994. It has been very difficult, with a Party that does not have resources, in the light of the amount of work that goes into production of the AC. I know Cde Jeremy (Cronin) carried it a lot, especially from just after 1990.

Since 1990 (and particularly since the 1994 democratic breakthrough), the AC has continued to carry through its pages some very important debates, not just about the SACP but also about our 1994 transition, the struggles against neoliberal policies, against our own government. The AC continues to be a source of Marxist analysis of the global situation.

One of the most important tasks facing the SACP going forward is the need to produce more writers for the AC and beyond, especially African and women writers. However, the AC itself needs to make a contribution by encouraging the publication of writings by some of the younger and emerging writers. Celebrating the AC as having been part of the past 60 writing and fighting years, should also underline the fact that the forthcoming period requires even more of fighting and writing as we seek to drive a second, more radical phase, of our transition, as our direct route to socialism! A fighting SACP must continue to be a writing SACP!

Cde Nzimande is the SACP General Secretary and Minister of Higher Education
60 WRITING YEARS

AC’s contribution to the ANC

Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledges the AC’s continuing contribution to the development of the ANC’s ideology – and particularly to its non-racialism

I am honoured to be among you today as we mark and celebrate 60 years since the publication of the very first edition of the African Communist.

We are celebrating this anniversary not simply because it is customary and courteous to do so, but because we genuinely recognise the immense contribution the AC made in the ideational sphere of our struggle against apartheid colonialism.

The AC did not descend from above as a result of divine and celestial intervention. Its creation and success over six decades depended entirely on the dedication and hard work of some of our most under-celebrated comrades.

By celebrating this anniversary, we are therefore also paying tribute to the countless revolutionaries of our movement who made the AC possible as contributors, editors, distributors and all others involved at various levels of the production value chain.

We pay tribute to their extraordinary spirit and conviction that made them unflinching in their desire to launch the AC in 1959. During those dark days in our country – when all seemed hopeless – any association with communist material could have easily meant imprisonment, tor-
ture or even death.

The first edition of the AC declared: “This magazine, ‘The African Communist’, has been started by a group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa, to defend and spread the inspiring and liberating ideas of Communism in our great continent, and to apply the brilliant scientific method of Marxism to the solution of its problems. It is being produced in conditions of great difficulty and danger. Nevertheless, we mean to go on publishing it, because we know that Africa needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain.”

We admire their determination and selflessness that propelled them to risk life and limb to propagate the noble ideas of a society founded on the basic truth that all human beings are equal.

Sixty years later, with the benefit of hindsight, we can confirm that indeed our entire democratic movement needed communist thought as dry and thirsty soil needs rain in its prosecution of the liberation struggle.

While we may not all be communists, it cannot be denied that communist thought – transmitted through the AC – has served to conscientise, shape and produce the best ideologues among us who play no small role in guiding policy formulation and ensuring that the policies we adopt are at all times consistent with the theoretical foundations of our movement.

The AC was not only education material for the intellectually curious. It was also a campaign tool which had the faces of the Rivonia trialists on its cover in 1988 as well as a carrier of world news that honed our internationalism.

It was also a platform for robust inter-party and intra-organisational debates which would have a bearing on the strategic direction of our revolution.

The 1992 third and fourth quarter editions exploring the prospects
of a negotiated settlement in South Africa, as well as the sunset clauses that would enable such a settlement, remain the best examples of how communist thought – transmitted through the AC – has played a decisive role in the direction of our movement and country.

The AC is one historical repository of some of the best intellectual traditions of our democratic movement. It has helped facilitate important debates about the future of our country and gave us the opportunity to be exposed to new and varied ideas about the same questions.

In other words, the AC expanded one’s world view and brought to light the existence of many other world views and perspectives.

In this regard, we appreciate the role played by the AC in exposing the limitations of narrow African chauvinism as opposed to progressive nationalism.

The journal indeed sharpened our understanding of non-racialism. The ANC – in its formulations regarding the national question at Morogoro in 1969 – had been fundamentally influenced by debates carried in the AC during the course of the preceding decade.

Our non-racialism – premised on the proposition that we are all equally South African – is all the more important now when, in light of scarce resources and a tough economic climate, some in our society are tempted to revert to the backward tendency of magnifying otherwise meaningless racial and ethnic differences as a basis of accumulation and exclusion.

It is our legitimate expectation that the AC will continue to place itself at the service of our movement to propagate our idea of non-racialism and other morally compelling ideas as it successfully did for the past 60 years, especially under the difficult conditions of illegality.

Although wholly committed to the success of the National Democratic Revolution as led by the African National Congress, the AC has always been a platform for critical ideas – holding true to the Chinese
dictum, “let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend.”

The AC has made its mark in the battlefield of ideas. It has always sought to challenge backward ideas and debunk the myths upon which right wing, anti-communist and anti-ANC perspectives are based.

More importantly in this second phase of our transition from apartheid colonialism to the national democratic society, the AC has also served as a platform for progressive voices critical of the ANC and its government.

To this extent, we view the journal as an integral part of our revolutionary conscience, warning us always about the slow pace of socioeconomic transformation, the dangers of corruption and capture of the state by private corporate interests, the erosion of our moral credibility, the weakening of state organs and the resultant decline in electoral support.

Needless to say, all these things taken in their totality do constitute a dangerous point of entry for counter-revolution and the reversal of our democratic gains.

All the efforts we have undertaken towards the renewal of both our movement and the state are in no small measure influenced by the many critical voices we would have encountered in the AC.

As was said in a letter to the journal by one of its readers, “pluralism of opinions and diversity of views is not a sign of weakness. It is an expression of inner party democracy. Such healthy debates can only strengthen the party”.

We are indeed looking forward to the next 60 years of the AC – a critical platform for healthy and necessary debates in our society.

I am personally very happy that you have managed, Comrade Blade, to archive every single edition of the AC since 1959 on your website.

This gives us the confidence that this great journal will outlive us and we
will be able to bequeath it to countless future generations who, in all likeli-
hood, will need communist thought as dry and thirsty soil needs rain.

We wish you many more years of thought leadership.

*Cde Ramaphosa is the President of the ANC and country and a former trade unionist.*
Sixty years is a milestone. It is a time to celebrate, an opportunity to momentarily look back but also chart the way forward. The *African Communist* is a periodical premised on African solidarity and provides a platform for all Marxist Leninists of our continent to engage, debate and formulate the ideals of Marxist Leninism.

We are all richer for its existence and as the workers, we look back on the past 60 years with nostalgia to its contribution to our liberation and education. The AC played an integral part in helping to elevate the civility of our public discourse, conscientising us and allowing all of us to scrutinise and debate issues in a meaningful way.

It also allowed us to be both informed and properly engaged. In the struggle for partial and transitional demands, the workers, now more than ever before, need platforms like the AC to help us analyse and critique the current epoch and also inform our decisions as we try to map the way forward.

I want to start my input by quoting the current General Secretary of the Party (SACP) Cde Blade Nzimande when he provided warnings of what could become of our revolution during the Cosatu 8th National
Congress: “Unless, the working class leads, working programmatically and in action with the widest range of the mass of the urban and rural poor, unless this is done, the promise of 1994 will collapse into agendas of narrow self-enrichment, and general confusion. The SACP is prepared to work with all potentially patriotic and progressive forces – but one thing is clear, the bourgeoisie, and the emergent bourgeoisie, separately and together are incapable of charting a way out of our persisting crisis of underdevelopment. The working class must lead.”

Marxism-Leninism teaches that the Party of the working class has the leading role in the struggle for the elimination of the exploitation of man by man and the building of a socialist society, which will eventually be transformed into a communist society.

But a party does not earn the title of the vanguard of the working class merely by proclaiming it. It achieves this position by the degree to which it organises the class it represents, the calibre of its day-to-day leadership and its devotion to the revolutionary cause. This is the reason why, as the workers, we expect the Party to give correct guidance to the revolutionary cause, especially now when there is a lot of zigzagging on the policy front and the overall political direction of the country.

A worsening economic crisis is causing anxiety, helplessness and panic to a struggling working class that is being crushed by the cost of living and unemployment. For the first time since 1994, an IMF-World Bank intervention is realistic if things do not dramatically change.

Let us look at the considerable pushback against any talk of the Reserve Bank expanding its mandate and acting in the interests of the unemployed and the poor majority. This is the same Reserve Bank that has done considerable damage to this country’s economy under the guise of independence. After the democratic elections in 1994, ex-apartheid minister Derek Keys and the South African Reserve Bank (SARB) under another apartheid apparatchik, Chris Stals, decided to
scrap the Currency and Exchanges Act of 1933 and the adoption by the SARB of what is called “flexible exchange controls”, to facilitate capital flights out of South Africa. This led to a mass exodus of large corporations like Anglo-American, South African Breweries, Dimension Data and Old Mutual from the country they had exploited for more than a century, to settle abroad.

In these turbulent political and economic times, let us also reflect on a dangerously irreversible path of degeneration of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). Our NDR is a revolutionary perspective that is different from the bourgeois-democratic and nationalist struggles that have often been dominated by elites. The elitism that we see today and the agendas of narrow self-enrichment, and general confusion is something that is foreign to us as workers who still believe in the NDR. As workers, we do not identify with this dominance of a neoliberal policy trajectory that attacks our labour rights, pushes privatisation, trade liberalisation, casualisation and retrenchments. Our NDR is not about the survival of the fittest.

The dominance of monopoly capital means that many of the socio-economic gains our revolution has achieved since 1994 stand in danger of being overwhelmed by the continually declining share of the workers in the national income as a result of intensified mechanisation of work, casualisation and retrenchments amidst the persistence of the triple-crises of unemployment, poverty and inequality.

Workers, therefore, want to see and hear the vanguard of the working class providing direction. Have we given up on building the global internationalist working-class movement altogether? Also, what is the socialist theory of an alternative world economy to stand up to the free market or are we now accepting state capitalism and a moderated neoliberalism as the only available and workable options?

Trade unions are under siege; they have to reflect on why they have
failed to defend and improve the lives of the workers. But all Marxist-Leninists know that there is nothing inherently revolutionary about trade unionism. Unions do not challenge the existence of wage slavery; they merely seek to obtain more favourable terms for the sale of labour-power.

The reality is that union memberships are declining at an alarming rate and unions are no longer able to work with the broadest sections of workers in strike activities and campaigns. We, therefore, expect the Party of the working class to stand in the front-line trenches of all kinds of struggles, even when they involve only the most modest material interests or democratic rights of the working class. The Party must take an active part in mass trade union activities for the purpose of strengthening them and raising their spirit of militancy.

We are marking Red October in an environment where there is an upsurge in xenophobic attitudes and violence in the country. This is pitting members of the African working class against each other. How is this level of political backwardness possible under our watch? What is the role and the responsibility of the Party and the progressive trade union movement in arresting this political degeneration?

These are some of the pertinent questions that the AC has posed to us and allowed us to debate in greater detail over the better part of six decades. It exposed us to incisive opinion pieces, critiques and insightful analysis that left us feeling empowered and confident of effecting change and embarking on the programme of transformation not only in the country but also the continent.

The state of Marxism in the continent is regrettable and the emergence of narrow Africanism and nationalist tendencies points to an increase in political backwardness. One of the achievements of our NDR has been its ability to mobilise and unite our people, particularly the black majority, around the project of non-racialism and non-sexism,
and more precisely around the project of nation-building.

Our revolution is now faced with growing threats that undermine our ability to not only unite but to also mobilise the black majority. The most disturbing development is the resurfacing of narrow Africanism (including tribalism) which is tied to both populist demagogueries within and outside the ranks of our broader movement.

The strategic task of regaining the unity of our people will not be possible without us implementing the second, more radical, phase of our revolution. To be precise, we cannot effectively mobilise and unite our people without a programme aimed at ending monopoly capitalism, accelerating state-led industrialisation, overcoming apartheid spatial inequality, and advancing our massive education and training programme and so on.

In the immediate post-colonial independence period before capitalist integration, liberated Africa seemed to share a critique of capitalist development and was committed to following anti-capitalist alternative development. At the head of the liberation project were broad multiclass movements of liberation, capable of mobilising alliances of the widest range of social forces led by the working class and the peasantry. The main feature currently of contemporary African liberation project is the decline of liberation movement as the legitimate expression of the democratic demands of the colonially oppressed people and in some cases an open abandonment of national democratic tasks.

It is clear that the working class requires organisations to prosecute the day-to-day defence of their economic and social interests. This brings us to the weighty matter of the SACP and state power, and implications of this question on the nature of the Alliance. We also have to deal both with the question of the reconfiguration of the Alliance around the minimum programme of the Freedom Charter, as well as the short-term tactical alliances with the broader formations within
civil society that may share temporary common interests and concerns on issues such as corruption.

We now have a situation where the SACP and Cosatu totally agree on the need for a fundamental change in the nature of the Alliance. We have already answered the question of whether the ANC in its current state and class orientation is capable of uniting and spearheading the struggles of the broader masses of our people, of which the working class is the primary motive force. The answer to that question is not necessarily.

But it is not enough to offer the working class only a new address. Our comrades at Numsa and Saftu learned this recently when they gave workers a new address without doing a qualitative analysis of the balance of forces. But the issue of the poor performance of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (SRWP) is also our problem because we need to understand its ramifications for the left in general. What does this mean for the progressives, when it comes to the elections and the electorate’s attitude towards socialist principles?

As we push back against the fraudulent agenda of self-enrichment, neoliberalism and monopoly capitalism, we must also give substantive content in theory and practice to real alternatives. Let us advance a genuine second radical phase of the National Democratic Revolution.

In this month, when we celebrate the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution that was spearheaded by Vladimir Lenin, whose creative combination of revolutionary theory and practice left the international working class with the science of Marxism-Leninism, we need to do more to lay the foundations of socialism. Marxist-Leninism and the Bolshevik revolution showed us that the challenge for revolutionaries is to practically make revolution rather than wait for it to happen.

Happy 60th Anniversary to the *African Communist*!

*Cde Ntshalintshali is Cosatu General Secretary*
60 WRITING YEARS

... as dry and thirsty soil needs rain

Essop Pahad reflects on the significance of the launch of AC and the continued need for liberatory Marxist-Leninist theoretical analysis

If one wants informative and thoughtful assessments of the launch and early years of the African Communist (AC), essential reading includes Rusty Bernstein, in his book Memory against forgetting and Ronnie Kasrils, in his article The African Communist’s Clandestine Years (AC, October 2009), as well as Brian Bunting’s Introductory essay (at disa.ukzn.ac.za).

The AC was launched in October 1959 by a “group of Marxist Leninists in Africa” and not in the name of the SACP, as at that time the SACP had not yet declared its existence as an underground party.

The first edition, as well as those following for many years after, was edited by Michael Harmel, who used the pseudonym A Lerumo – well-known for the book 50 Fighting Years. Cde Harmel was an outstanding Marxist-Leninist theoretician and an exceptional writer. In the very first issue he boldly proclaimed: “It is being produced in conditions of great difficulty and danger. Nevertheless we mean to go on publishing it, because we know that Africa needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain”.

That we are marking the 60th anniversary of the AC is testimony to the heroic efforts of SACP leaders and comrades to produce and distribute
the AC, even if it could mean imprisonment, torture and death. Let us recall that one of our courageous underground activists, Ahmed Timol, was arrested, tortured and killed by the brutal apartheid regime in 1971 as a result of his activities in the underground of the SACP and the ANC.

I believe that, 60 years later, not only Africa but the world “needs Communist thought, as dry and thirsty soil needs rain”.

I recall that it was Cde Ahmed Kathrada (Kathy) who gave me a copy of the very first issue. He then instructed me not to keep the AC at home but in a safe place since if one was found with a copy of the AC it could lead to arrest and imprisonment. I found a neighbour in the same block of flats we lived in – Orient House, Becker Street, Ferreirastown – and that is where I kept that treasure house of knowledge and information.

Those of us who were given copies of the AC were overjoyed and excited by the contents of that first issue. Since then my love and respect for the AC has only grown stronger and stronger. Some of our great African theoreticians and thinkers such as Cdes Joe Matthews, Duma Nokwe and ‘Oom Gov’ Mbeki contributed to the AC. MP Naicker, the first editor of Sechaba, the official organ of the ANC, was also a contributor.

I was first asked to serve on the AC board in either 1967 or 1968. For me this invitation was a matter of joy, pride, excitement and also doubt. Was I really good enough to be on the board of such a prestigious journal, I asked myself? Cde Joe Slovo gave me a lift to my first meeting and I was very nervous to be in the company of Cdes Joe, Harmel, Brian Bunting and Rusty Bernstein, but they gave me a warm welcome and assured me that I would be a valuable addition to the board. As a member of the board I learnt a great deal about our own struggles against racism and fascism, colonialism and imperialism, the African continent and international developments. At times the debates on a wide range of issues were robust, even aggressive; but never disrespectful. They
also strengthened my own understanding of Marxism-Leninism and the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries, as well as the critical importance of international solidarity.

Cde Harmel was not only an outstanding thinker and writer but also a wonderful, warm, friendly and compassionate human being. At that time the AC had an office in Goodge Street, London, around the corner from the ANC office in Rathbone Place. Let us pay homage to Cde Sonia Bunting who single-handedly ran the AC office for all those years. Without her contribution we could not have produced and distributed the AC.

Cde Harmel had a remarkable way of working with young comrades. He always encouraged us, and with care and patience pointed out weaknesses in our ideas, writing and work. I still recall the time Cde Harmel used to say, “Let us lift some elbows.” – going for a drink in the AC office – (mind you – only after Sonia had left)!

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the AC, let us pay our respects and give our thanks to the first editor of the African Communist, who continued in this role for many years: Cde Michael Harmel!

After Harmel’s death, Cde Brian Bunting edited the AC from 1972-1990. I served on the board until we returned home in July 1990. In those years I contributed a number of articles and for some time wrote Africa Notes. I had the daunting task of taking over that role from Thabo Mbeki, who in addition contributed some brilliant articles under the name Jabulani.

My own understanding and knowledge of developments in Africa as well as that of progressive movements and personalities was greatly enhanced by my friendship with Amath Dansoko, the General Secretary of the Party of Independence and Labour of Senegal, who passed away recently. Amath and I worked together on the editorial council of the World Marxist Review for years. He became my closest friend and comrade and taught me more about the continent than any other individual I can think of.
There is no doubt that the AC had a profound impact upon the cadres and leaders of our revolutionary Alliance inside and outside the country, as well as on progressive forces in the African continent, and in the international communist movement. Readers appreciated its thoughtful, rigorous and incisive analysis of complex issues, problems and developments in our own country, the continent and the world.

As communists and revolutionaries we should be proud of the role and function of the AC throughout its existence. I would argue that we need the AC now as never before, since we all need the challenging, profound and liberatory ideas of Marxism-Leninism.

We must be resolute in fighting what seems to be a growing resistance to theory and the theorisation of our struggle for a national democratic society and for the creation of a non-racial, non-sexist democratic and prosperous country. The party and the AC board have to take up the cudgels and defeat the anti-theorists, the pessimists and the purveyors of conservative and reactionary politics. We have to promote with all our energy the ideas and practices of international solidarity. At this moment let us intensify our international solidarity with the fighting people of Palestine against the aggressive, colonial and reactionary regime of Israel and its powerful international supporters.

We should be ready to embrace new ways of thinking and understanding of the science of Marxism-Leninism. We should reject dogma, sectarianism and obsolete thinking; we should build the party and help to develop a powerful, broad anti-imperialist progressive front by enhancing new ideas, new approaches and deepening our theoretical and practical political activities as we seek to create a transformed and socialist South Africa and Africa.

Cde Pahad is a veteran SACP and ANC leader and former Minister in the Presidency
60 WRITING YEARS

Looking back, looking forward

Jeremy Cronin argues that the AC must draw critically on its past to engage with the challenges of the present and future

Since its first publication, the *African Communist* (AC) has announced itself as “a forum for Marxist-Leninist thought”. Its 60th anniversary deserves, therefore, both an historical and materialist reflection that considers the different historical conjunctures across its six decades, as well as the vastly changing material conditions for its production, distribution and, critically, reception. What is the relevance and what are the challenges, for instance, of producing a quarterly Party journal in an era of 24-hour global electronic news and the proliferation of social media? This short article can only attempt to flag some of these issues.

The story of the AC is an integral part of the wider story of communist parties worldwide and their publications, newspapers, journals, pamphlets, bookshops, worker libraries and study circles. In the first half of the 20th century, communist parties had a close affinity, were virtually synonymous, with their respective publications. The broader public identity as well as the unity of the leadership of the Party was cemented around an official organ – often a weekly newspaper. The Party publication was seen, in Lenin’s words, as “not only a collective propagandist and agitator, but also a collective organiser”. “Running

This interconnection was not just functional but also often location-al. In the early part of the 20th century Party offices and the still-largely artisanal printing works were sometimes located in the same building, or nearby. Certainly, the print works was often a place of meetings. Lenin in 1900, like Trotsky, engaged in writing, typesetting, printing and smuggling Iskra into Russia from exile. It was in and around the weekly publication of Party organs like these that leadership collectives would meet to refine the line, to debate current events, to develop a Party identity... and to disagree. The centrality of the publication and its line is emphasised by the fact that editorial disagreements often led to organisational splits. Indeed, Lenin split from the Iskra collective in 1903 when his proposal to cut the collective to three was not accepted, a break that was part of the Bolshevik/Menshevik divide within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

Here in South Africa things were not entirely dissimilar. Party-building and the Party organ were symbiotically connected from the earlier forerunner of the Communist Party in South Africa, the International Socialist League’s *The International* through the CPSA’s *South African Worker/Umsebenzi* and *Inkululeko* of the 1920s and 30s.

The production and distribution of the Party mouthpiece was typically a serious matter. In his autobiography, *Rebel Pity*, Eddie Roux describes what he calls “The Happy Year” of 1930 that he spent in Cape Town in the weekly effort of writing and typesetting *Umsebenzi* from Sunday night through to Thursday morning when he would carry the galleys to the printer. “Never had I worked so hard but never was work more rewarding,” Roux remembers.

Once printed, the copies needed bulk packaging to post before 6 pm to catch the evening mail to Johannesburg, Durban and the other major
centres. “Failure to get them off in time would mean disappointment and reprimands from the north, for the papers had to arrive there by Saturday to be sold over the weekend.”

Selling the weekly paper was typically the main form of Party membership activism in those years. It was also a measure of communist discipline, a measure that was sometimes carried to extremes as Ray Alexander was to recall in the 1990s: “In those years [the early 1930s] we spoke of the ‘Bolshevisation’ of the Party. The idea was to tighten up on inner-Party discipline...This was not in itself incorrect. But, unfortunately, the manner in which this ‘Bolshevisation’ was applied was often dogmatic and intolerant. For instance, in 1931 the Party executive in Joburg sent a representative down to the Cape Town district committee.”

The executive representative was Lazar Bach, who was put up in a house of Cape Town comrades. “Under the bed he was sleeping in,” Ray Alexander recalled, “he found three unsold copies of the Party journal, Umsebenzi. They were part of a batch given to comrade Joe Pick to sell. Pick had already returned in full the sum owing on the batch. The money for these three unsold copies had obviously come out of his own pocket. Nevertheless, he was expelled from the Party for failing to carry out his duty to the full! That’s how things were in those days!”

When the African Communist first appeared in 1959 it was a very different South Africa (and indeed world). The CPSA had been banned for more than nine years. Secretly, the Party had been re-launched as the SACP in 1953. The majority of communists devoted themselves to the still legal existing and emerging mass organisations – the ANC, the wider congress formations, and Sactu. In these years, communist writers, among them Brian Bunting, Govan Mbeki, Lionel Forman, MP Naicker and Ruth First, were central to sustaining what we can now recognise as the forerunners of progressive and investigative journalism in our
country – via the weekly *Guardian* and its successors - *Advance, New Age* (the original, not the Gupta perversion of recent times), and eventually *Spark* as the apartheid regime banned one title after another.

Clearly left-leaning, these publications were nonetheless neither openly Marxist still less communist, and while this was a necessary precaution it also enabled them to sustain a wider readership. However, by 1959 within the SACP underground leadership there was a sense that there was a need for a more avowedly Marxist-Leninist publication, particularly given the pace of formal decolonisation now beginning to take place in Africa. What lay beyond formal decolonisation? Would it be a capitalist path under a neo-colonial dispensation? Would the aspirations and hopes of the struggling masses on the continent be betrayed? Surely a different, socialist-oriented, “non-capitalist” path was imperative.

There was no disagreement that the SACP had an important national and even continental role in this context, but should a new, Marxist-Leninist journal be published under the name of the underground SACP? On this, the Party leadership was divided. Some argued that revealing the existence of the underground SACP would compromise communists operating within the still unbanned ANC, that narrow nationalists within the ANC would use such a publication as evidence of the existence of a communist faction within the movement. Others in the Party leadership believed that it was time for the SACP to have a public face. In the end, the matter was settled with the October 1959 publication of the AC. It was a compromise proposed by Rusty Bernstein who in his autobiography, *Memory Against Forgetting*, recalls: “The publication of a regular journal of Marxist views on African and international affairs, without any identifying Party label, seemed to take the middle ground. I made the proposal; both sides agreed to it, perhaps as much as a gesture of peace as for its intrinsic merit.”
The anonymous publishers of the first issue of the AC styled themselves as “A group of Marxist-Leninists in Africa.” Mick Harmel was the actual editor, and Govan Mbeki, Rusty Bernstein, Ruth First, Joe Matthews, Duma Nokwe, Brian Bunting and MP Naicker were part of the contributing team. The 28-page first edition was produced through the arduous process of cyclo-styling by hand that limited the print-run of around 1 000 copies. Nevertheless, a start had been made, a marker placed down.

Re-reading 60 years later the editorial notes and articles in this first issue of AC, there is, at once, a feeling of deep familiarity and comradeship, much of the discussion is one we could be having amongst ourselves today (Is there a progressive role for a black bourgeoisie? Or not?). And yet there is also a sense of a very different world and set of assumptions.

It is the late 1950s. The Soviet Union has emerged victorious from World War II, having literally saved the world from fascism at the cost of over 20-million Soviet citizens dead. 1959 also marks the 10th anniversary of the triumph of the Chinese revolution (while the impending Sino-Soviet split that was to wrench the international communist movement is still to come – only a year or so later). In Cuba an improbably small band of guerrillas has just, within a matter of two years, mobilised peasants, workers and students to topple the US-backed gangster regime of Batista. One-third of the world’s populations now lives under communist-aligned systems. In 1956 Sudan gains independence from British colonialism. In the same year Morocco and Tunisia gain independence from France. The following year, Ghana gains its independence.

The first issue of the AC is, accordingly, upbeat. There is a sense of a world on the move in which the momentum has shifted decisively to the forces of socialism and national liberation. The role of the AC is seen as continental, pedagogical, even proselytising.
“The imperialists are trying to keep knowledge of Communism from the African people,” the editorial notes of the first issue state. “But they cannot succeed. More and more working people in the Continent are striving to learn more about Marxism. The duty of a Communist is to study Marxism and the conditions in his own country, wherever he may be, and to teach others. In Africa Communists have also other duties, if they are not merely parlour-socialists. They have to take an active part in the struggles of their people, as oppressed people, for national liberation.”

While the promotion of a serious engagement with Marxist theory in an African context was (and is), surely, absolutely correct, there is a tendency in these editorial notes (and in the following decades of the AC) to treat Marxism (an “official Marxism”, which is to say “Soviet Marxism”) as a ready-made set of laws, a tool-box that just needs to be applied to “conditions” in our own respective countries – not a dynamic body of scientific theory to which African revolutionaries also have the capacities and responsibilities to develop. “The Marxist philosophy, dialectical materialism, enables us to understand these laws [of society]. It gives us the key to understanding the world as it really is – and how to change it.”

Largely absent in this line of thought is Cabral’s notion of the deep cultural stock of African resistance experience and its relevance to the development of Marxism, or of the Latin American Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed”. There is a long, if sometimes marginalised, tradition within Marxism of recognising the creativity of the popular masses, the weaknesses, but also the strengths of this capacity. The working class and broader popular masses are not just empty vessels to be filled with the “correct theory”. Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci among others wrote thoughtfully about this.

One consequence of this tendency to regard Marxism as a dry text-
book set of timeless categories became observable in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when those associated here in South Africa with the 1996 class project appropriated Marxian terms (“balance of forces”, “dialectics”, “forces of production”) as “tools of analysis” stripped of any socialist content or ambition. There is also a lurking “stageism” in the early AC’s posture: “our first task in Africa is to get rid of imperialism…After imperialism has been defeated, the struggle will not be over. The countries of Africa will still be faced with the tasks of overcoming poverty, exploitation, disease and ignorance. These battles can only be won by marching towards a Communist Africa.”

Note also the somewhat unfortunate (equally “stage-ist”) tendency to portray Africa in colonial terms – as a “backward”, “ignorant” and “diseased” continent – as “undeveloped”, rather than a thoroughly modern reality, actively shaped and continuously “under-developed”. There is a suggestion that the struggles against poverty and exploitation come after the demise of imperialism, rather than being integral to it. Moreover, the somewhat throw-away phrasing (“After imperialism has been defeated…” ) seems to envisage a relatively short-to-medium term horizon for this to happen.

But in the wider scheme of things, these are quibbles made with the privilege of hindsight and on the basis of a collective struggle and collective learning over the following six decades in which the AC was to make its own major contributions.

Interviewed for the 50th anniversary of the AC, SACP veteran Cde Eric Mtshali had fond memories of the role the journal played in the exile years of the 1960s and 70s: “The AC was very popular. It was used like a textbook in the camps, teaching politics. It was distributed at the University of Dar es Salaam. It was popular with students there and academics…many comrades got their education through the AC, even those who were not members of the Party, especially those in MK.
And it had lots of articles on Ethiopia and all parts of Africa. We were real African Communists. The AC brought us closer to Africa and to the world. It was distributed to many universities in Africa and the Third World. I know that there were Marxist Study Groups using AC in places like Madagascar, Ghana and Sudan. The Communist Party in Sudan used AC a great deal. I remember they used to order in bulk and our comrades in Ghana too. Lesotho also used AC a lot.” (“AC should return to its roots”, AC 178, 3rd quarter 2009).

Paradoxically, the material conditions that enabled this expanded role for the AC were made possible by the trans-location of the Party leadership that remained out of jail into exile. From the rather artisanal reproduction of the journal in the underground of Johannesburg, bulk printing and worldwide circulation of the AC was now generously undertaken by the German Democratic Republic. But editorial control was located in London, in a pattern that would have been familiar to Lenin (Iskra was located at one point in London). Circulation numbers reached 20 000 at times in the following decades. Brian Bunting, who was now to become the long-serving editor, recalled that: “The office of the AC in London was the only open centre of the SACP activity anywhere in the world, and was besieged by visitors from all quarters wishing to make contact with the Party or to undertake discussions.”

In its first decades, the AC was avowedly continental in its targeted readership and coverage. While miniaturised copies of AC as well as AC issues with false covers like “Antiques”, or “Gardening” were smuggled into South Africa, the bulk of the circulation was not within the country in the 1970s and early 80s. It was in MK camps and ANC offices and bases around the world that there was a major readership, as well as among the leadership, at least, of fraternal African national liberation movements.

But the AC also reached beyond the African continent. On her re-
cent visit to South Africa, the iconic Afro-American Marxist-feminist, Angela Davis, remembering her own avid following of the publication during her radical, black power Californian years of the 1970s, asked her University of Pretoria academic hosts whether the *African Communist* was still being published. (Her hosts were apparently nonplussed, which reflects many things about present realities, including a deep gap between the SACP and its publications and progressives on most South African campuses).

The early AC certainly had an over-optimistic reading of global trends. It arguably had a tendency to repeat a rather text-book, “official Marxism-Leninism”, which went hand in hand with dismissive inclinations when it came to a flowering of Marxist and New Left theoretical innovation in the 1970s. (It was a dismissive tendency that was not shared by all of the AC’s earliest contributors, like Ruth First and Harold Wolpe). Whatever its limitations, however, perhaps even because of some of its orthodox “certainties”, the AC played an absolutely critical unifying and stabilising role in the immensely difficult exile years in which South Africa’s liberation movement found itself in a prolonged and dispersed diaspora.

It has often been remarked that the ANC exile story is relatively unique for the 20th century. Compared to virtually every other left-wing movement forced into exile, the ANC managed to sustain its unity and win over new generations of revolutionaries. Emerging from exile, prison and the underground in 1990, the ANC was more united and hegemonic than ever before. The role of the AC in MK camps and exile offices, as an ideological compass and reference point, was surely an important contributor to this reality.

It is no wonder then that, reflecting on his own nearly three decades of exile, Cde Eric Mtshali in his AC 50th anniversary interview should want the AC to “return to its roots”. But is it possible to return to those
roots in 2019? Not only has the world changed immensely but the media space in which we operate has been radically transformed.

We live in an epoch awash with party political media statements and interviews, much of them trite. It is difficult now to imagine the devotion back in the 70s or 80s with which comrades in a township backyard somewhere in South Africa would tune in to a crackling, short-wave Radio Freedom broadcast, coming all the way from Addis Ababa, to “get the line”. It is hard to believe now that comrades would risk lives to smuggle in and photocopy dog-eared copies of the AC, or, later Umsebenzi, and avidly discuss articles in secret study groups. Where 24-hour TV channels have turned politics (and life more generally) into a spectacle, and where hashtag mobilisation promises instant gratification and shifting and fragmented identities, sustained organisational work and collective theoretical development is challenged... and yet they are more necessary than ever before.

But how? “Although there are electoral machines – still called ‘parties’ out of inertia – that issue internal bulletins to their indifferent representatives, the arc that once linked action and the future, parties and intellectuals, has been broken,” writes Regis Debray with a not untypical French intellectual flourish. Debray is surely overstating the case, but there is enough truth in this observation for us to pause and think self-critically.

Debray proceeds: “The parties have ceased to be issuers of alternative ideas, while writers and thinkers must throw in their lot with the broadcast networks that have acquired an industrial and commercial life of their own.” Instead of thoughtful collective debate and polemic within organisations, we now have, says Debray, “the struggle of images and personalities, the battles of the scoop and the sound bite. No need for parties here!”

Going forward, the AC cannot simply return to its past. But there is
much to learn from that past and there is much to consider about the challenges of the present and future. In Debray’s argument the world of the socialist party’s bedrock infrastructure – the book, journal, pamphlet, night-school and bookshop – has been displaced by the mass media, the “videosphere”, the world of the fleeting image and changing fashion. This displacement, in his view, has also opened up a chasm between an intellectually hollowed-out political party form and what were formerly organic progressive intellectuals who have now become, at best, non-aligned, dial-a-quote media personalities.

This is surely too bleak a version of our challenging contemporary reality. In the 1970s when, along with others in the deep SACP underground, I was involved in a return to the artisanal production of Party publications, cyclostyling and mailing a few thousand of the SACP’s official *Inkululeko* newsletter, our underground unit always appreciated when the copy sent to us clandestinely from London included a polemical attack on IFP leader Gatsha Buthelezi. Buthelezi, who at that time had a weekly column in a number of English-language newspapers, would unfailingly respond to the underground Party’s attacks and actually quote sections of *Inkululeko* – giving more prominence to the existence of an underground SACP and its line than our few thousand cyclostyled copies could hope to achieve.

The moral of this anecdote is that it is possible to achieve a bridge (in this case an entirely polemical and fortuitous bridge) between Party publications and mass and (now) social media spaces. Debray’s pessimism about the potential durability of progressive political party organisation is grounded in a too-bookish, and too-intellectualised worldview. Yes, progressive books and journals and intellectual seriousness are critically important. Yes, the world of tweeting has facilitated the rise of demagogues – whether Donald Trump or Julius Malema. But there were demagogues long before social media. Yes, Marxists like
Lenin were serious readers and active writers – but Lenin also deeply appreciated the organising and mobilising capacity of the hashtag of his era – the right slogan (see, for instance, Lenin “On slogans”).

Yes, the mass media, particularly TV, have too often turned politics into mere spectacle and performance (red berets inviting violence in parliament in order to wear the mantle of victimhood). The mass media has largely become a platform that rents out an audience to advertisers, demobilising popular forces into consumers of spectacle. But here in South Africa, in struggle through mass meetings and revolutionary songs with their embedded slogans, a different kind of bridge between theory and popular practice has often been achieved.

Instead of abandoning the important theoretical and organisational space created by journals like the AC in favour of social media, or, contrariwise, simply reproducing the AC as if it were still 1959 – we need forge active bridges between old and new media and wider social, institutional and technical realities.

*Cde Cronin is an SACP Central Committee and Politburo member, former SACP Deputy General Secretary, political prisoner and Deputy Minister*
60 FIGHTING YEARS

The AC on women – and women in the AC

Jenny Schreiner surveys the strengths and weaknesses of the AC’s varied coverage down the years of women’s emancipation issues, gender, and the struggle against patriarchy

This year we reflect on 60 years of theoretical and analytical contributions in the pages of the African Communist, and use this as an opportunity to reflect on how the SACP has theorised and analysed the position of women in South African society, theorised and analysed the relationship between patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism, and the role of gender struggle and the struggle of women within the South African revolution. The topic of the African Communist and gender enables exploration of the history of AC in relation to a range of dimensions – women authors, women in editorial boards, history of communist women, books by women and books on women’s struggles, SACP position papers on gender issues, theoretical approaches to the Woman Question, analysis of women’s lives in South Africa and the role of women in revolution, and whether women in the Party and the Left used or engaged with AC content.

Who are the women who wrote for AC over the past six decades? How have women contributed to writing of articles in AC? What topics have they written on? How have they been supported? And this question of women authors raises the question of whether any
men have written on gender in AC?

In 1989, a profoundly useful contents and index of the first 30 years of the AC was published, and it provides us with an easy route for identifying who the women were who contributed to the pages of the AC in that period. What is missing is the contents and index of the subsequent 30 years. We need a librarian intern or student to prepare a bibliography of the last 30 years in time for the SACP’s centenary.

Some of the analysis of who the authors are requires knowledge of who the authors are behind the pen names, Cde Brian Bunting editor of the AC for many years has left us with some of the identities, but we need to decode the rest, and in particular those of women authors. Historians of the Party must undertake this project before our institutional knowledge has left us. While some of the women cadres wrote under their own names even in the period of illegality – Mary Benson, Hilda Bernstein – others, such as Ray Alexander, used both their own names and pseudonyms. Ray Simons used the name of Matajo - a compilation of the first letters of the names of her three children, Mary, Tanya and John; she also wrote as RS Nyameko. Again here is a project for the centenary: to compile an index of all pen names and identify who the owners of pen names were.

The use of pen names makes analysis of who the women authors are in terms of age, class and colour difficult. But in reading through the work by women authors one is not convinced that there has been a dedicated process of developing and encouraging women authors, though in the 1980s tasks were given to young women in the frontline states and inside the country involved in the work of the Party to write for the AC. In the *African Communist*, there tend to be articles by the same authors, and this perhaps raises the need for the current editorial collective to diversify the women authors writing in the pages of the AC. Currently, there are more women authors contributing to *Umse-
Women have written on a broad range of topics, including trade unions, commercial agriculture, the revolutionary path, living standards, international developments, African liberation experiences, child genocide, co-operatives and socialism, information and communication technology, industrial policy, the role of youth in the revolution, the role of the church in the South African liberation struggle, and the path of South African revolution. What is interesting though in reading some of these contributions is that few of these articles mainstream gender into their analysis.

**Introducing women authors through book reviews**

The AC historically carried book reviews and through this, introduced readers to a range of works of women authors. Amongst the seminal works on the woman question, patriarchy and revolution, we find reviews of Angela Davis’s book *Women, Race, & Class*, Miranda Davies’ *Third World, Second Sex - development and women*, and Cheryl Walker and Betty du Toit’s works on women’s struggles in SA. The reviews also cast light on the prolific writings on Africa by Cde Ruth First. The reviews also interestingly focused on novels, reflecting the understanding of the Party of the importance of South African literature. Women novelists included Nadine Gordimer, Pauline Podbrey, and Elsa Joubert.

The book review section also drew attention to biographies on women leaders, including Frances Baard, Ellen Khuzwayo, Helen Joseph, Winnie Mandela, and Emma Mashanini.

We should ask why the AC editorial board has stopped carrying book reviews, a missed opportunity to flag books that cadres should be reading and to consider how they are relevant or not to the struggle. The role that the AC has played over the years in encouraging and guiding wider reading by comrades cannot be over emphasised.
Women in the editorial collective

Cde Ruth First served as a member of the underground editorial collective. Already an experienced editor, who had served as editor for many of the Party and Congress linked left newspapers, she was an obvious candidate to help establish women on AC editorial boards.

Sonia Bunting ran the AC Office in London, the only public office that the SACP had in exile. As the only open centre of the Party anywhere in world during the exile years, this office was besieged by visitors from all quarters wishing to make contact with the Party or to undertake discussions. As Brian Bunting noted, the role of the Party in the liberation process was the subject of intense interest both from friends and enemies. Apartheid agents who had succeeded in bombing the ANC office in London had also planned to bomb the AC office, but for some reason did not carry it through. Documents captured by British police investigating a separate issue revealed the existence of a death list headed by Oliver Tambo and Joe Slovo on which the names of Brian Bunting, editor of the AC, and his wife Sonia also figured. From that time onwards the AC office was under protection of Scotland Yard. Cde Sonia said all policemen looked the same and she never knew which of the personnel she spotted in the street outside the office were friends or foes.

There is no detailed list of all those who served on the AC editorial board in exile and so one may well miss the contribution of women cadres in this regard. In the post 1991 period, there has been a far more prevalent presence of women on the editorial boards, even though again there is no consolidated list of cadres of the editorial collective. Among those who have served on the editorial collective are Geraldine Fraser Moleketi, Joyce Moloi Moropa, Jenny Schreiner, Reneva Fourie, and Celiwe Madlopha.
Commemorating communist women

The AC has played an important role in recording the contributions of leading communist women largely through obituaries and book reviews. As we move towards the centenary of the SACP, these should be collated into a biography of communist women. There were some reflections on women outside of the South African revolution, as seen in the photo feature of the: 100th anniversary of the birth of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg (AC, 417, 4th quarter 1971).

Through the obituaries of Kate Molale and Florence Mphosho, we catch a glimpse of the role that Communist women played in the international left women’s movement. Cde Molale represented the ANC Women’s Section in the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) 1970 – 1975. In 1978 she joined the OR Tambo delegation to Cuba. She spent her last years in Tanzania, where she looked after children while their mothers were busy with activities connected to struggle. Cde Florence Mphosho participated in the Congress of the People and the Freedom Charter, and the Alexander bus boycott. She went into exile after 1964 and represented South Africa at the WIDF. She attended the ANC’s famous Morogoro conference, and was elected to ANC NEC and served in women cadre development in the Women’s Section from late 70s.

The obituaries cover women who died of natural causes such as Lilian Ngoyi, Dora Tamana, Rebecca Bunting, Phyllis Naidoo, Ray Alexander, Ncumisa Nkondlo, Judy Mulqueeny, Fezeka Loliwe, Joyce Mashamba, but also tell the story of women who were assassinated by the apartheid regime including Ruth First, Jeanette Schooon and her young daughter Katryn, and Dulcie September.

Party statements on gender issues

While the pages of AC cover SACP statements and political reports
extensively, a key function of the journal being to communicate SACP positions and strategy, there is little coverage of SACP statements on women’s issues and gender struggles. Prior to 1991, there appears to have been only a South African Women’s Day SACP Leaflet (AC 86, 3rd quarter, 1981). In the post 1991 period, there are a number of statements included in the AC, and recently the political reports by the general secretary to the Central Committee have integrated a number of analyses of gender issues into the report. In the post 1994 period, as policy was being developed in Parliament, the AC carried the “Women’s right to choose – SACP Policy statement to the Parliamentary Select Committee on abortion” (AC 141 2nd quarter, 1995).

The SACP Gender Commission Response to the paper on “Class Struggle in the NDR: Class Formation, Class struggle and the Liberation of women – the Inter-relationship of Class, the National Question and Gender in the NDR” was covered in the AC 168, 1st quarter, 2005 and in the post-14th Congress African Communist of 2017, and the issue of gender-based violence was dealt with in coverage of the implementation of 14th Congress resolutions.

**Writing on the Woman Question, patriarchy, women’s emancipation**

In exploring how AC covered Marxist Leninist approaches to the Woman Question and the emancipation of women, we find that there are close to 30 major articles covering the Woman Question, role of women in Revolution, on Marxism and Feminism, organising strategy in relation to women, and gender issues. Coverage starts from 1975, the International Year of Women, with an article by Naomi Richards and a speech to the Frelimo Women’s Conference by Samora Machel. Cde Essop Pahad, who served on the Editorial Board at the time reflects that the inclusion of articles on gender issues came about later than it should have, and had been prompted by the left feminist movements
of the late 60s and early 70s in Britain, the US and Europe.

After this first foray, there is a significant gap in writing on gender issues, until 1984, declared by the ANC to be the Year of Women, in celebration of 30 years since the launching of the Federation of South African Women, and the adoption of the 1954 Women’s Charter, which had involved many key communist women. This year of articles on women is followed from 1987 onwards with more consistent coverage, but there were still many issues of the AC that have no articles written by or on women/gender.

There are three strong trends in the articles over the past three decades. First, those that outline the status of women in South Africa, often with respect to particular areas of focus: women in the economy, women in the household/family, women in the rural areas, women in the informal economy, women and the law, women and traditional cultures, women and education. There is a tendency to cover all these different areas in one article, thus falling short of in-depth analyses of each of these topics. Second, there are articles that engage on theoretical questions of Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, feminism, and that explore experiences of and lessons from socialist states on the emancipation of women. Third, there are articles that focus on the role of women in the revolution and on why and how women should be organised. What is of concern is that there are few instances in which authors directly engage with what another author has argued.

**Has AC talked to the lived experiences of South African working-class women?**

There is a range of writings that examine the position of women as workers, the burden of child care and housework, women’s experiences of bantustans, and gender inequality in law. Many of these articles tend to be more descriptive of women’s status and the causes thereof
but they do consistently assert the triple oppression of South African women in terms of race, class and gender.

Despite the extent of the gender-based violence (GBV) scourge in SA from the apartheid era and through into the post-democratic breakthrough, the AC, until 2018, merely had a couple of sentences in articles or statements. It is interesting that in response to the perceived “failure” of socialist feminism to address the lived oppression of women, there has been an emergence of radical feminism, particularly in US, with a theoretical approach that places GBV as a central cause of patriarchal oppression of women. The AC covered General Secretary Cde Blade Nzimande’s speech at the launch of the Red October Campaign against Gender Based Violence in 2017. The speech identified capitalism and violence as twins, and engaged with how the social reproduction crisis of capitalism fuels GBV. This is expanded on with a brilliant analysis of GBV in the global arena by Tithi Bhattacharya. However, it is apparent both within the ranks of the left and the broader GBV campaigns that this deep analysis is not widely understood or accepted, raising the question of who is reading AC and how the SACP media strategy and social media campaign should introduce and lead activists to the articles that are published in the AC. It is through this that the Party influence on the understanding and hence strategy to prevent, combat and eradicate GBV should be felt.

**Developing theory – towards Marxist-Leninist feminism?**

AC has carried a range of articles addressing the materialist analysis of women’s position in society and the relationship between Marxism and Feminism, and this is where divergent views can be seen. The common ground is that patriarchy is older than capitalism but is now reinforced by capitalism and takes varying forms in specific social settings. All of the analyses in AC recognise that there is no
essentialism of women’s condition. Materialist analyses of production and/or reproduction are unpacked in a variety of different approaches.

The debate about materialist analysis of women’s subordination is critically important not only in relation to how to defeat patriarchy. It is also important because it has made significant theoretical contributions to Marxist-Leninism in its critique of narrow economism and determinism, pointing to social reproduction and the superstructure in general as key sites of struggle for emancipation of women. It further challenges the determinism that socialism will solve all problems and focuses us on organising strategy and struggle as key to the content of any socialist future. Pat Horn in 1991 in an article reflecting on whether Marxism and Feminism are uneasy bedfellows or compatible argues that yes they are compatible but only if Marxism is not rigid and doctrinaire. There are a range of articles that engage on whether feminism is reformist and un-Marxist, whether feminism is rooted in socialist traditions, and whether critiquing feminism places an obstacle in the struggle against patriarchy. The Party position in relation to feminism/feminisms is still open for debate.

It is clear across the articles in the African Communist that the material and structural basis of patriarchy needs to be studied in relation to particular historical periods, forms of class society, and specific modes of production. Patriarchy is historically grounded and not a universal explanation of male dominance. There are a range of articles from the last two decades of the AC, consciously building up to the bicentenary of the birth of Karl Marx, that engage with Marxism’s contribution to and weaknesses in the analysis of women’s subordination, oppression and exploitation. This approach has perhaps found resonance in the emerging Party position on production and social reproduction and the informal economy as key in women’s emancipation struggle.
National oppression, capitalist exploitation and women’s emancipation

Interestingly and disappointingly, there was little analysis of socialist countries’ experiences of the emancipation of women and the struggle against patriarchy and for gender equality. While revolutionary movements were liberating their countries and establishing new forms of state and society, there was inadequate exploration of what these revolutions meant for working class women. What was missing was in-depth analysis of each revolution in a manner that enables analysis of the forms of patriarchy found in that society and the forms of resolution of the gender question in that particular society. There are articles in the recent period that critique the Soviet Union and Comintern as economistic, deterministic, and failing to address patriarchy; that reflect on the Chinese experiences of the connection between nationalism and patriarchy; that touch on the Cuban approach to the family code in 1975 and hence on the gender division of labour in the family; and that touch on the Vietnamese and Nicaraguan experiences. It is unfortunate that the widespread study and reading by left women in South Africa on Third World and socialist countries did not find a way into articles in the AC.

All authors on the woman question/gender struggle recognise the triple oppression of women (race, class and gender) in South Africa and hence focus on the relationship between national liberation, class struggle and women’s or gender struggle. We should note none of the literature on the relationship between the national question and class struggle/social question include the relationship to women’s/gender struggle. The critique of stage-ism that emerged in the women’s organisations and in gender studies through the materialist analysis of the women question that posed the obvious question of “when will patriarchy be eradicated – as phase 3?” did not emerge in these debates.

Organising women into the revolution for women’s emancipation
Particularly in the 1980s, during a period in which mass women’s organisation was resurgent, and women workers in trade unions were finding their voice, there was extensive writing on the role of women in revolution. Articles focused on the lack of women’s experience and leadership in trade union, political and community organisations outside of women’s organisation, and argued strongly for the training for leadership in organisations as a precursor to women in leadership in a future people’s state.

There is a consistent argument that women must be organised into the revolution and most seem to agree that there are multiple sites of organisation and struggle for women. There was debate about women’s organisation outside of the liberation movement versus women’s organisation inside the liberation movement. Through the various contributions the following pillars of organising for non-patriarchal democracy and socialism can be extracted. There was a need for autonomous mass women’s organisation that mobilises women as part of the motive forces, that embarks on training of women and identifies what issues women should be mobilised around. There was unpacking of the role of a gender department/women’s section within a political organisation and of the role of women in the military forces of the liberation movement in a period of armed struggle. There is a strong argument that there is space for and a need for an alliance or front of women’s forces. The importance of organising women within the trade union movement is clearly put forward. The issues of the role of a Women’s Ministry and the risk of ghettoisation of women’s issues versus a Gender Ministry focused on gender mainstreaming across all spheres of government, and social partners in the national gender machinery are debated.

Perhaps what we need to extract from these articles is less a defence
or critique of Marxism and more the application of Marxist analysis to the lived reality of black working class women, of urban and rural poor women in SA.

It is only recently that SACP documents and AC articles are beginning to integrate analysis of gender issues, of status of women and on the need for gender transformation into their analysis. From my experience this has been a perspective raised in Central Committee by the Gender Department/Gender Commission since 1991. It has been slow to gain traction.

As indicated, even when articles have been written by women authors, the nature of the interface of patriarchy with class and race does not easily find its space.

This raises the question as to whether the average reader of the AC, the membership and the leadership of the Party actually read the writings by female Party theoreticians on the women’s question. Do we have an echo chamber effect? Have Party gender theorists and activists been speaking to ourselves?

How have Party members and the Left more generally used and engaged with the AC on gender? There are two dimensions to this question. Firstly, has writing on women and the women’s question in the AC attracted women to read the AC and to read beyond the articles on women? Secondly, have Party members through reading the AC had their gender consciousness developed? Neither of these are easily answered but the questions should inform party branches and districts in the rolling out of political education. Reflecting on how narrow the discussion of the AC articles on the women’s question/gender has been, We seem not to have gained as much as we should have done.

In the current era it raises the following issues: Do Party branches discuss AC articles in political and ideological development sessions? Do tweeters tweet about articles on the women’s question and gender
transformation? Do various Communist University study groups engage with these articles, and do they ask gender questions of texts that they are considering?

**Gender analysis of the Party programme**

Interestingly, there is little analysis in the pages of the AC of the various SACP programmes and their contribution to the struggle against patriarchy and for women’s emancipation. Again there is a potential research project here to do a systematic and detailed analysis of the gender content of the SACP programmes ahead of the Party’s 2021 centenary. As a cursory glance across the Party Programmes the following can be observed.

*The road to South African freedom* (1962) has one paragraph on women, while the preceding six sections – analysing communism, the African revolution, colonialism of a special type, and the forces for change and NDR – are silent on women and gender.

The 1989 Path to power does speak to the triple oppression of women, and one wonders if this was influenced by the discussions in the pages of the AC in the 1984-1989 period on the status of women and the nature of their oppression. The commitment is made to ensure that disadvantages suffered by the majority of SA women are eliminated in the context of the democratic struggle, and this includes fighting sexism within the ranks of the party and broad liberation movement. In the long term, an advance to socialism as a society in which resources are, in a planned and purposeful manner, dedicated to overcoming sexist oppression is identified as being in the interest of all South African women.

The strategic perspectives adopted by the 9th Congress (1995) made some important points, in a section specifically dealing with gender, noting that: “... patriarchy has to be consciously addressed and
dismantled, it will not simply wither away because the economic basis of women’s oppression has been removed.” (1995:9).

SACP 10th Congress programme (1998) is very uneven in its analysis of gender relations. The section dealing with the NDR and parts of the section on Our Marxism provide useful analyses. However, other sections, particularly that on economic transformation and the transformation of the State, are remarkably gender-blind, despite there being broad analysis to draw from.

More research is needed to see how the 2007 South African road to socialism and its gender content, and the updating of the South African road to socialism in 2012 and 2014 have been covered in the pages of the AC.

**SACP on patriarchy, gender transformation and the role of women in revolution in 2019**

After 60 years of the AC and a reflection on the window that this journal gives us on key theoretical debates, party positions and analysis of the South African revolution, we are able to explore how the development of the SACP’s position on patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism and the struggle for women’s emancipation and gender equality has unfolded.

In July 2017, the SACP 14th Congress tabled a Discussion Document Inseparable connection: woman question, class struggle and the NDR which was meant to be included as an additional chapter of SARS, but has not been and nor has it been published in the AC, denying access to it by a broader audience than the Congress delegates. This formed the basis of the Congress resolution that is shaping both the SACP and the SACP-Cosatu gender programme of action.

The 14th Congress Resolution: “Patriarchy and gender relations in South Africa” is perhaps the most comprehensive consolidation of
the theoretical and analytical work on this topic that found its way on to the pages of the AC over past decades. It is in the context of this resolution that we celebrate 60 years of the AC. The topics of congress resolution cover a programmatic approach of SACP on the Woman Question; violence against women and gender based violence (GBV); defence and consolidation of gains of the democratic breakthrough in the struggle against patriarchy and gender struggles; impact of women’s unique life cycle on social participation; women and economic activity; patriarchy and land reform; women and education; the battle of ideas and anti-patriarchal struggle; mass organising of women of working class communities around daily lives; infusing women into SACP trade union commission work; inner party work on the woman question; and South African traditional cultural practices and patriarchy.

I hope that this contribution in the context of the 60th Anniversary of the AC will stimulate both further research on the role of the AC on gender transformation and socialism and greater efforts to improve Party work in this area, including in the pages of the AC.

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60 WRITING YEARS

AC: shaping young minds for socialism

Xolani Fakude argues that valuable though the AC is, it does not speak to a broad enough audience and should use more "hash-tagable” language

The *African Communist* was and continues to be a critical platform for activists driven by the desire to realise a society in which, as articulated by the Party’s late General Secretary, Cde Chris Hani, “there shall be shelter for those who are homeless, water for those who have no safe drinking water, quality health care for all, a life of dignity for the old, a society in which the huge divide between urban and rural areas will be reduced, a decent education for all our people....”, in essence, socialism!

It is through the AC that even the Young Communist League of South Africa on its relaunch in 2003 was able to advance some of its more potent battle cries such as the 10 youth demands. It is through the AC that we could, as young activists within the Party, familiarise ourselves with and deepen our understanding of the relevant scientific tools we could rely upon in our attempt to understand the kind of a society we live in, its challenges and more importantly, what is to be done. In other words Marxism-Leninism.

It is through the progressive ideas and writings that, as young activists within the Party, we could understand and appreciate the fact that at the centre of our unemployment and under-employment, the poverty that
we face daily, the lack of opportunities for entrepreneurial initiatives, the inadequate education infrastructure such as basic libraries and laboratories to support our aspirations, the “black tax” that newly formally employed young people face keeping them in a chronic debt trap among others, are the inherent evils of a global system in which the few who own the means of production are unwilling to let go of their privileges for the benefit of the whole, in essence capitalism.

The critical question is that while we could access this important platform as young members and activists within the Party and the YCLSA, did we leave the rest of our peers behind as we deepened our understanding of the socio-economic contradictions that befall us?

The very fact that the AC was established by, resilient and defiant activists within the Party under the most severe of circumstances serves as an inspiration for youth today. The journal was established and successfully published in a country governed by a regime that had passed the Suppression of Communism Act.

Ours is now a democracy in which the Party operates openly. Even under our democratic dispensation, the Party is remains relevant, because of the material conditions of the poor and the working-class. This is perhaps one of the main reasons behind the emphatic, yet sometimes misunderstood, call by the YCLSA for the Party to explore other means to attain state power.

With the Party unbanned and in the context of our fight for socialism, we have a collective responsibility to communicate our views innovatively and consistently without relying on the monopoly capital-controlled mass media platforms. Our traditional class adversaries who control media outlets will push back against any of our attempts to reach our targeted audience, the motive force of our revolution. This is a global phenomenon not unique to South Africa. The ruling class will always seek ways to dictate what the working class and the poor are
exposed to, to maintain their stranglehold on the means of production. Under these circumstances, the AC can provide us with an ideal platform to continually popularise our views in the battle of ideas.

Since its establishment, the Party in South Africa has sought to advance the aspirations of the poor and the working class. As a counter-strategy to the Party’s programme, it was banned, compelling it to rely on even more innovative underground strategies so it could continue to advance its views. An obvious consequence was that even its material could be only accessed by a limited number of activists. But we are now living in a democratic dispensation and the Party as a political formation in its own right has a definite interest on state power.

The Party has a responsibility to communicate its views to the masses. More directly, the target audience can no longer be limited to, either by design or default, to its membership and other like-minded activists only.

The ruling class will not go down without a fight and so the onus is on us to continuously evolve the methods we use in the battle of ideas. The ruling class has a coherent strategy that touches many aspects of young people’s lives, seeking to influence how they view their material conditions. For instance, the basic education curriculum of this country is deliberately designed to produce a loyal labour force for the markets to exploit.

It is certainly not intended to produce critical, conscious individuals who will understand that it is all about the greater good, not about the individual. Our allies in the education sector, the South African Democratic Teachers’ Union, refer to this phenomenon as the globalised production of human robots through curriculum content and standardised testing. From this perspective, socialism looks even further away than ever: the evils of capitalism will be defended by its very victims.

To this end, and as a response to this gruesome reality, one of the members of the National Committee of the YCLSA produced a literary work intended to explain socialism in the simplest terms, particu-
larly for young people. Ideally, such content should be part of learning and teaching support material in our schools. Not surprisingly capital disapproved and, through its representatives in the publishing companies, used various ploys to block the project, including the Copyright Amendment Bill – ironically a bill whose objectives include tilting the scales towards more access to education material for working class youth in an era of exponential digital developments.

Multiple strategies are required for us to shape young minds in preparation for socialism and the AC, as it historically has been, is one of those platforms that we can use with great efficiency. But it cannot be denied that the AC and other Party journals are inaccessible in their language by the intended audience particularly young people. We are speaking to ourselves, and thus preaching to the converted.

We should use even the “hash-tagable” language familiar to young people to express our views and, shape theirs in preparation for a socialist future that they should build now. Rapidly evolving digital platforms offer us an opportunity to reach the targeted audience, without over reliance on traditional media.

To answer the first question posed in this article: yes, as young activists within the Party we have left our peers behind in deepening our understanding of our socio-economic conditions. It is now up to us to move forward from this reality in a correct manner. We need to take them along: the AC amongst other platforms offers us precisely the means to do so. To demonstrate a point, the author went to a great length to package this article in a language that is as accessible as possible and that can most likely be understood with relative ease by our targeted audience.

Cde Fakude is a YCLSA National Committee member and National Coordinator of Cosatu’s Young Workers’ Forum
For the past six decades, the *African Communist* (AC) has provided a critical ideological platform for the left within the Alliance. The AC has sharpened the intellectual tools and shaped the ideological orientation of countless activists of the movement, myself included. At all critical stages of our revolution, the AC was present to guide thinking and frame debates and strategies. Often this was under the most difficult circumstances, but committed activists risked life and limb to ensure distribution across the length and breadth of the country and beyond.

Indeed, the AC was one of the bedrocks of the strong intellectual tradition that grew and was sustained in the movement and broader Alliance over many decades. The AC remains as relevant today, although I think we must acknowledge we no longer have the same passion for thinking and ideas, particularly because the ANC today has become intellectually (and some may say ideologically) stagnant. Conferences have become reduced to factional contests rather than spaces for contesting ideas and policy positions.

The AC must be seized with rebuilding our proud intellectual tradi-
tion. But to retain its status as a core strategic intellectual and mobilising platform that can shape critical choices the country must make, it needs to move with the times, and draw in new thinking and new voices. The AC must recognise the triple set of dangers it confronts: being ideologically static and rigid (as opposed to consistent), succumbing to factional interests within the ANC, and talking to ourselves. Failure to recognise and confront these dangers will set back the project to deepen participatory democracy and advance the material conditions of the working class and impoverished under-class.

This short piece celebrates the work of the AC over the past 60 years through focusing on substantive current issues and choices the AC will need to confront looking ahead.

**Growth and redistribution**

The role that the AC played over the past 60 years in understanding the ever-changing political economy of South Africa has been invaluable – educating us on the essential features of colonialism of a special type, the relationship between apartheid and capitalism, and how the global balance of forces continually shaped the political and policy choices available to us.

Post-1994, the AC has been consistent in its position that political freedom is shallow while the concentrated structure of the economy remains. Most recently, the AC has shaped debates and thinking on “radical economic transformation” (RET). The AC, in its 2016 feature on RET, made a significant contribution to counter the populist version of RET that focused on dismantling “white monopoly capital” and on aggressively pursuing the indigenisation of the commanding heights of the economy. The SACP correctly characterised this iteration as “RET vulgarism” and as “radical economic looting”, a characterisation that is sadly reinforced daily through the evidence at the Zondo Commission into state capture.
The SACP also correctly argued that GDP is an inadequate measure of development, and that growth in itself will not address the structural weaknesses of the SA economy. But I felt that the SACP’s discussion document “Going to Root” underemphasised the importance of national economic output growth. Here I agreed with Cde Joel Netshitenzhe that in the 2003-2008 growth period, despite this growth being consumption-led, unemployment still fell to the lowest levels in the past 40 years (down from 31% to 23%), and state revenue grew to an all-time high (which in turn enabled our post Great Recession counter-cyclical fiscal policy stance of infrastructure-led growth).

Where I totally agreed with the “Going to Root” paper is that this growth was always going to be short-lived and unsustainable, and further did little to address inequality. What we have failed to do over the past 25 years is diversify and transform our economy out of its dependence on commodity exports and financial inflows. This reflects our failure to resource and implement industrial policy, and address binding logistics and skills constraints.

I am comforted in that the ANC’s December 2017 Nasrec national conference addressed the anti-growth sentiments in the Alliance, with prioritisation of inclusive growth. But the detail is lacking on how we unlock growth in a manner that both transforms the economy and impacts most on unemployment and inequality. More urgency is needed to finalise the policy shifts and new instruments needed for faster and more equitable growth.

The SACP has criticised the National Treasury’s August 2019 “Discussion Document - Economic transformation, inclusive growth and competitiveness - towards an economic strategy for South Africa”, on four core grounds (1) being non-consultative in process; (2) being overly neoliberal in posture and echoing the prescripts of the multilateral institutions; (3) recommending the privatisation of state-owned
corporations (SOCs); and (4) threatening to roll back the collective bargaining gains of organised labour.

Without commenting on the merits and demerits of these positions (this requires a paper in its own right), I feel it is critical that we quickly move beyond debate and ideological impasse to find areas of common ground where we can direct resources and make an immediate impact. I don’t think there is much disagreement on the need to increase investment in logistics capabilities, in upscaling skills development, in resourcing innovation and R&D, in designing new financial instruments, and in using incentives and other measures to promote local content and employment intensity in sectors where we are or could be competitive. Here we might find there is more common ground within the Alliance and among key stakeholders than we think. We cannot keep trying to find some kind of perfect consensus while the country teeters on the brink of economic crisis. We probably also all agree that we need to drastically raise the execution capacity of the state, and up the ability of government to lead the whole of society behind a concrete programme.

What is probably more difficult is reaching consensus on how we accelerate asset and income redistribution.

I have argued elsewhere that the ideas of Thomas Piketty are instructive for understanding how inequality is reproduced, with the returns on capital (invested in the stock market, in real estate, etc.) exceeding the rate of growth of income. This not only triggers the tendency towards rising inequality, but also constrains growth of the productive economy. The more concentrated the wealth, the less the private savings invested in the economy, and the more the likelihood of financialised economic activity (speculative stock trading, etc.).

This is particularly the case in mature capitalist economies (in which economic growth largely just keeps pace with population growth). De-
developing and industrialising economies can experience high growth (and reduced inequality) as a result of improvements in education, skills, technology, new regulatory frameworks, innovation, logistics, etc. As these economies mature, growth slows, with the tendency towards rising inequality. South Africa displays many of the features of a mature capitalist economy (high wealth concentration, low growth, and returns on capital exceeding income growth), but with one important difference – that 60% of the population does not participate in meaningful economic activity (as employees, self-employed or employers). This has resulted not only in growing disparities between capital and income within the formal economy, but also in growing disparities between the formal components of the economy, and the economically excluded (unemployed, informal sector, former bantustans).

In this sense, measures to reduce inequality must not only focus on offsetting extreme wealth accumulation and concentration (through progressive income, capital and inheritance taxes, etc.), but also focus on raising productivity among the economically excluded (both in class and spatial terms).

Key to this will be a stronger emphasis on redistribution measures that also support the growth and restructuring of the productive economy. The AC has been particularly strong on this issue. Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) and land reform, rather than just being about ownership transfer, must grow productive capacity (output, employment, exports, etc.).

In our context in South Africa, we also cannot ignore the racial dimensions of inequality, and how it impacts on our vision of a non-racial society. As we recall, the ANC’s landmark 1969 Morogoro national consultative conference resolved that non-racialism and democracy were the organisational features of the National Democratic Revolution, but our failure to transform the material conditions of the African majority
has allowed racial populism and demagogy to grow. Fiscal redistribution has significantly dented extreme poverty and provided millions of South Africans with access to basic services, but the racialised nature of our inequality demographic remains.

The AC has been at the forefront of criticising BBBEE, both in terms of the narrow black elite it created, and how it drove the primitive accumulation logic of a parasitic bourgeoisie tied to factional political patronage.

What is required is a new class project to establish an innovative and patriotic productive class. This raises myriad questions: how is this to be assembled, how is existing capital to be integrated into this project, what will be the relational position this class has with the working class and underclass, and what agency and instruments are needed to build these new capabilities? We look to the AC to shape this thinking and debate.

**From state capture to state building**

The AC has been consistent in its campaign against state capture, and in exposing malfeasance and corruption. This, it must be said, happened through the time that the ANC remained largely in denial that the state (and itself as the governing party) had been captured. The SACP, together with other Alliance components such as Cosatu, played a central role in Cde Ramaphosa’s victory at Nasrec. The AC was also key in countering the narrative that the Zuma faction promoted radical transformation, while the Ramaphosa faction were supposedly lackeys of “white monopoly capital” (the fake news narrative developed by the now disgraced London-based Bell Pottinger).

The impact of state capture has been clearly spelt out: hundreds of billions looted and redirected away from service delivery spending on the poor, the security cluster reduced to a shadow of its former self,
state-owned entities driven to the point of near collapse, and the hollowing out of capacity across the three spheres as the state was repurposed to service corrupt patronage networks.

The rebuilding project has commenced, starting with the security cluster and state owned companies (SOCs). But as we rebuild, it is important that we don’t succumb to overly rigid prescriptions of the respective roles of the state and private sector. International experience shows that countries that have successfully achieved sustainable and inclusive growth have moved beyond old paradigms and taken more nuanced and pragmatic approaches to the respective roles of the state and the market.

This includes countries where left parties govern. Both China and Vietnam, while remaining one-party communist states with limited application as models for our own transformation, have integrated state-ownership with market dynamics in which both the state and private sector collaborate in building productive capability.

Other left-governed countries such as Venezuela (under Hugo Chavez) pursued a state-driven development path, with direct nationalisation of energy, telecommunications, and other industries, but with a net outflow of investment, know-how and productive capability. While much was achieved in growing the co-operative and micro enterprise sector and combatting deprivation through expansive social programmes, this was financed through commodity surpluses (oil). This quickly dried up with the global commodities downturn, further compounded by political sabotage, weak technical capacity, and lack of investment, triggering the economic crisis from which Venezuela has been unable to recover (see Julia Buxton, New Left Review, number 99, 2016).

Lula’s Brazil had enormous successes (such as poverty reduction) associated with extensive fiscal redistribution programmes and a suc-
cession of minimum wage increases. But Lula paid less attention to addressing structural weakness in the Brazilian economy, and mobilising capital around new productive capabilities. In ways that mirror South Africa, Lula’s fiscal redistribution triumphs were matched with industrial regression, with a continuous shift away from value-adding industrial sectors towards the financial sector and resource-based extraction (see Perry Anderson, “Crisis in Brazil”, London Review of Books, vol 36, no 8, 21 April 2016). Again, in ways similar to South Africa, this created new vulnerabilities as weak commodities demand and fickle financial inflows quickly undermined Brazil’s fiscal redistribution package in the post-Lula conjuncture.

Singapore’s experience is instructive for other reasons, showing that we need to challenge our assumptions about the state and market. Singapore’s Government Linked Companies (GLCs) regularly outperform their private counterparts; but this performance is dependent on corruption being kept in check, respect for the bottom line, and governance and technical capacities being in place.

But even in a context like ours, where we don’t have the enablers in place for high performance state entities, privatisation is no magic bullet. Imagine if we had privatised in the heyday of state-capture – no guesses who would be wearing our crown jewels. This said, the private sector has a role to play in investing in state utilities and assets, and we need to look at how this can be effectively regulated and governed in the national interest. Looking ahead, how can the AC assist us traverse this difficult terrain?

In learning from these experiences, we must have a more pragmatic approach to the state and market, and take a far more deliberate approach to addressing our structural weakness. This will necessitate working with capital around innovation and technology development, strengthening new entrant private-sector actors in strategic sectors,
and supporting the expansion of new productive capacities and knowledge.

In the short term, macro-economic policy risks must be managed in the context of a severely constrained fiscal position, significant contingent liability risks of SOCs like Eskom, and a stagnant economy unable to generate the revenue required to keep social wage spending in pace with cost of living increases. Given the sensitivities of a downgrade, the AC’s coverage of “RET vulgarism” and the proposed nationalisation of the Reserve Bank is on point in its argument that this (RET) perspective has less to do with growth and employment creation and more to do with dismantling the Reserve Bank’s capacity to monitor and control illicit capital outflows from South Africa.

Rethinking agency

The AC has consistently carried articles about the diminishing capacity of the ANC to play the leadership role of the NDR, as state capture and related patronage drove factionalism and division in the movement. And despite the victory at Nasrec, the state capture faction still remains strong and highly active in the ANC.

At times, the SACP has stepped into this leadership vacuum. Recently, the SACP had even considered fielding its own candidates in the 2019 election (should Ramaphosa have lost). Without offering a position on whether this was the right or wrong decision, it does raise the inherent danger of falling into the cult of personality trap – basing strategic decisions on the person in charge, rather than strategic and policy considerations. The fact that personalities count for so much in our politics reflects our under-theorisation of the transition, and our failure to get to grips with its structural underpinnings.

In considering the SACP’s leadership role, vis-a-vis the ANC and broader Alliance, two sets of issues stand out. The first relates to what
Ronnie Kasrils calls left narcissism: the fact that left parties and movements worldwide (and South Africa seems no different) remain ideologically and philosophically sectarian (divided among and between Leninists, Trotskyists, workerists, Maoists, socialists, and others).

The second issue relates to the fact that the left has become increasingly delinked from its grass-roots base (the working class and underclass). Here we must be mindful of what has happened elsewhere in the world where the left has lost its mass support base to the national populists, who are championing traditionally left issues such as job loss, deindustrialisation, and the rolling back of social welfare. Here, the left runs the risk of becoming a movement of intellectuals for intellectuals, pursuing a kind of left elitism - what Thomas Piketty calls the Brahmin left. In its worst iteration, left intellectuals debate with each other and leave the mass base to the influence of the national populists and demagogues.

This remains the core organisational challenge which the AC must confront: How the party remains intellectually and strategically relevant to influence the national policy discourse, while drawing from and embedding this thinking in its mass base. Also key will be how non-traditional constituencies (like professional youth, business, the church, traditional intellectuals etc) can be mobilised, and how new technologies and social media can be effectively utilised. This discussion must be premised on the understanding that the two core Alliance vehicles for mass mobilisation – the ANC and Cosatu - have been compromised by their own organisational challenges, with diminished reach and capacity.

This suggests that new conversations are required about political agency and mobilisation – a shift from tent politics to campsite politics. The delineation of campsites should be fluid and adaptive – drawing in civil society to defend and advance democracy; working with the
security cluster to defeat state capture; and even working with the traditional foe – capital – to develop new financial instruments, or build innovation capacity. This pragmatic approach by no means implies a laissez-faire free-for-all, but requires to be carefully co-ordinated in line with an agreed strategic agenda aligned to the needs of the current phase of the transition (itself a dynamic outcome of class and popular democratic struggle).

The current conjuncture remains volatile and fragile, with new risks associated with climate change and exponential technology change. The country remains at a critical cross-roads with the 1994 consensus having run its course. High levels of asset and wealth inequality continue to cause investment-reducing political and economic instability. Political elites compete with the poor and unemployed for diminishing fiscal resources. Social discontent has increased, not only among the unemployed but also among the working and middle classes who have seen living standards decline, fuelling the rise of anti-democratic populism. This is the vicious cycle that must be decisively broken, but leadership across various sectors of society remains weak and self-serving.

We will continue to look to the AC to provide the platform for intellectual engagement and guidance on these matters. I have no doubt that the AC will rise to the occasion.

Cde Jonas is an SACP member, a former MK combatant and a former Deputy Minister of Finance. He is the author of the recent book ‘After dawn – hope after state capture.’
60 WRITING YEARS

AC and Party media in the digital era

Digital communication and new media will have major implications for Party media. Buti Manamela and David Niddrie assess the challenge of shaping digital media to our communication needs rather than allowing it to shape our communications.

The old order is dying, the new order struggles be born. In this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear
— Antonio Gramsci

In the African Communist’s 60 feisty years, South African communists have been innovative and skilful in overcoming the many challenges and obstacles in its production and distribution, often under conditions of extreme repression, to provide rigorous and lucid analysis, arming South Africa’s people with revolutionary theory, and driving them into action.

AC and, more recently, Umsebenzi, found their way into the prison cells at Victor Verster, to rural bantustan villages of Gazankulu, into the dormitories of the University of Zululand, the MK camps in Bagamoyo, and the shebeens of Mzimhlophe, Soweto. To achieve this, under circumstances in which they produced the publications (with a chronic shortage of resources) in one foreign city, printed it in another, and then had to undertake, in conditions of great secrecy, a transnational, circuitous route to reach
its South African audiences, says much of the creativity of early editorial teams.

Today, facing a less daunting, but still substantial, digital challenge, SACP editorial decision-makers have made some concessions to the emergence of digital, “new media”. But they have yet (to adapt a favourite Joe Slovo term) to bell the digital cat.

While much of our natural working class audience is moving from long-form, traditional media to Twitter, WeChat, and Facebook, we have yet to properly adjust our media output to accommodate their changing media use habits.

The Gramsci dictum that introduces this paper (although referring to an entirely different terrain and set of circumstances), is a perfect description of where we are. The hegemonic, highly commercialised information production and distribution system, and the business model that sustained it for 200 years, is indisputably in terminal decline. Precisely what will replace it is not yet clear.

During this interregnum, Gramsci identifies “a variety of morbid symptoms”. A looser, more recent, translation renders the original Italian second sentence as: “Now is a time of monsters” – perhaps a more apt description for the deeply flawed “social media” system assessed in some detail in this paper.

Before examining the “social media” phenomenon, it is useful to recognise that the interregnum opens huge opportunities for left and progressive media – including the Party’s own African Communist and Umsebenzi – consigned by the old order to the media margins.

The commercial operating model of the mainstream media – print, and both analogue and digital radio and television – has been operating with great success for most of the last two centuries, drawing its primary revenue from advertising. As the three forms competed with each other for audiences (and for the advertising that follows the right sort of audi-
ences), their economies of scale were able to undercut and marginalise non-commercial competitors, imposing a media hegemony that defined as “normal”, the value system underpinning their commercial imperatives, and as “deviant” any media – or, indeed, and ideas – attempting to question this value system\(^1\). But this hegemony carried within it the seeds of its own destruction: as capitalism’s expansion-contraction cycles forced the media to jettison its diversity of content and opinion, it began losing credibility and the trust of much of its audience. This trend accelerated noticeably throughout the 1980s and 90s, as the contradictions between the media’s characterisation of the world and the daily experiences of audiences burgeoned.\(^2\) The trend was most obvious, globally, in working class and poor audiences.

When digital communication arrived, it was thus met by a massive global audience for whom the old order was already dying or dead. South Africa’s experience post-1994 has mirrored this process, although with a pause in the late 1980s and early 90s resulting for the massive optimism felt by audiences over a better, post-1994, future. We have joined the rest of the world in a time of monsters.

In this period, with the character and composition of the future system of formally disseminated information, analysis and ideas still unclear, offers the formally marginalised left and progressive media, including the Party titles, an opportunity to shape the new order as it struggles to be born. And this time to shape and participate in a system not as a marginalised poor relation, but as major participants.

Many progressives have already entered the fray – the community activists of *Benchmarks Foundation* and *Groundup*, the journalists of *New Frame*, to name but a few. Like the SACP, however, they have yet to engage the “small bite” formats of Twitter and co.

There is a cost to this participation, but it will be infinitesimal compared to the massive financial and human resources required under the old or-
der to compete on anything approaching an equal footing.

How then to proceed in this “time of monsters”?

It is worth noting the extent to which South Africans have, as the old order dies, adopted digital forms. We have 31-million active internet users; 29-million active mobile users; 54% internet penetration, meaning although less than 15% can afford to spend this amount of time on the internet for whatever reason. Google, You Tube, Facebook, Wikipedia, Twitter and Yahoo are some of the mostly used ‘international’ sites. Locally, News24, FNB and Takealot are in the top 10 companies.

Crucially, smartphone penetration is at 60% (although about 40% of these – 24% of the total – can’t afford the data required to use their smartphones for the internet-based services, including WhatsApp, Twitter, Telegram Messenger and so on) while 24% use laptop computers to access internet functions. South Africa has 23-million “social media” users, mostly accessing it on their smartphones. By 2023, fully 33% of South Africans are expected to have Facebook accounts. YouTube, Instagram and Twitter are also increasing their reach among South Africans. (Source: www.statista.com).

South African use of “new media” is growing, and growing fast. As telecommunications regulation and state-driven affordable, high-speed broadband access steadily drive down data costs, these numbers will continue to grow.

SACP and other left and progressive media needs to get in early to ride this wave into the future “mainstream” struggling to be born. Initially they will necessarily maintain one foot in the analogue (hard copy) past, and the other in the digital present, moving, as its constituency can afford to do so, increasingly towards a fully digital future.

There are two reasons for describing the platforms as “new” media, rather than ‘social’ media. New media is part of a new generation of digitised forms of media that is easily accessible, mainly computational, inter-
active and allows its users to produce and distribute content. Social media
does not have the preserve of all these elements, but is one component of
the ecosystem of “new media”.

And “social media” is a marketing description, not a real one: social
media is, at root, anti-social. It plays on a manufactured need for self- af-
firmation – in social media lexicon, to be “liked” and “retweeted”. As Guy
Debords declares in The society of the spectacle: “The reigning economic
system is a vicious circle of isolation. Its technologies are based on isol-
ation, and they contribute to that isolation. From automobiles to television,
the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as
weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender lonely
crowds.”

In this interregnum of social media ascendency, we must attempt to
organise and mobilise “lonely crowds”, who seek affirmation not by pre-
senting their own dissenting views, or being critical of those of others, but
by being seen to be part of the whole mass that consumes media without
critical engagement.

Edward Bernays asserts in Propaganda that “the conscious and intel-
ligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is
an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this
unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which
is the true ruling power.” Importantly, he continues, “we are governed,
our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by
men we have never heard of. This is a logical result of the way in which our
democratic society is organised.”

Collectively the creators of the social media platforms, Facebook, You
Tube, Twitter, Instagram and Weibo, constitute Big Tech (the digital equiv-
alent of monopoly capital). Messaging systems such as WhatsApp, Tel-
gram and WeChat have evolved into social media platforms by helping
users create “chat groups” to share text, audio and video content – in effect
to produce, or copy, and distribute their own news and opinions. These platforms have billions of users globally, increasingly dependent on them for all form of communication. Some have expanded this dependence to include financial transactions (as is the case with WeChat – with Facebook and others planning to enter the field soon). “Influencers” have become an important service, wherein celebrity users tap into and “sell” their followers to advertisers through subtle or more direct messaging. Some of the top influencers such as Kylie Jenner earn as much as $1,2-million (R17-million) for promotional Instagram posts.

Essentially, social media users are like zombies strolling into this cybernet-trap, and have developed an addiction through which they have surrendered their privacy, their ability to make rationale choices based on what they need, rather than what social media has conditioned them to believe they want. The very essence of what capitalism and democracy promises are being eroded under the name of capitalism and democracy. In Master or slave: the fight for the soul of our information civilisation, Shoshana Zuboff reminds us: “We think we’re searching Google; Google is actually searching us. We think that these companies have privacy policies; those policies are actually surveillance policies.”

A tale of two revolutions

We have all heard, and want to believe, the Arab Spring in early 2010 was born among angry young Egyptians, using “social media” to organise themselves to drive Hosni Mubarak out of office and help install (at least temporarily) a democratically accountable government that would serve their needs, interests and aspirations. In reality, just as complicated algorithms use mobile phone programmes (“apps”) to prompt decisions on what or where to eat, the political choices of young Egyptians were covertly directed and manipulated by algorithms constructed by a man named Wael Ghonim, with two friends and a computer. Ghonim is, and
was, a computer scientist working for Google Egypt, aided by Google and the US government. He describes the process of manipulating and directing young Egyptians in some detail in *Revolution 2.0*.

The crisis in the Middle-East is persistent, having started in Tunisia and spread through to Egypt where Mubarak was toppled but has been replaced by a military regime that has not only released him, but also replicated his rule-by-junta. The same ‘people-led’ Arab Spring revolutions also saw Libya reduced to rubble and the murder of Muamar Gadhafi following intervention of Western powers. It has almost permanently destabilised Yemen, plunged Syria into an unending civil war and have left Bahrain almost on the brink of non-recovery. Instead of using intelligence agents on the ground to manufacture coups, agents of regime change deploy political bots to manipulate and misdirect dissent to effect political change. This has proven cost-effective for covert interventionist interests.

One of the most controversial stories about democracy of our recent times is that of the US presidential elections. With the development of technology, the rise of political bots, the proliferation of fake news, the manipulation of people’s opinions using their own information, the Trump campaign successfully used UK-based Cambridge Analytica to deploy what they call psychographic capabilities to manipulate the choices of the electorate.

According to *The New York Times* (17 March 2018) the firm harvested private information of about 50-million Facebook users to develop techniques that underpinned the Trump campaign. The same firm was implicated in improperly assisting pro Brexit groups ahead of the United Kingdom’s Brexit referendum. Two recent examples of misuse of social media warrant a mention. When the September 2019 ‘xenophobic attacks’ began, people searched for and posted videos of acts of violence against immigrants – but many posted videos of attacks dating back years. This fuelled perceptions that South Africans were attacking
foreign nationals (especially of Nigerian origin), although what was taking place in the first wave, in Johannesburg, was a looting spree, during which the looters killed anyone resisting – 10 of the 12 people killed were South Africans, the two non-South Africans were both shopkeepers. The mainstream and social media’s near-hysterical Xenophobia! Reaction triggered more looting elsewhere, now more focused on non-South African-run spaza shops and other venues.

The second example was with the October weather scare in KwaZulu Natal. Videos of Hurricane Katrina in the US were distributed as though they showed storm damage villages in Mtubatuba. This should not, however, deter us from the significance of using these platforms for mobilisation and organisation. The Fees Must Fall movement, for instance, relied on the sympathy it generated through social media to exert enough pressure on government to accede to their demands.

What options for our media?
A range of options are available to the SACP to optimise digital “new media.

Clearly, in doing so we must remain conscious of the pitfalls and shortcomings of commercial “social media”, and avoid crudifying discussion documents, statements and so on into simplistic soundbites. The challenge it to circumvent these pitfalls and shortcomings – to use “new media”.

Generate interesting content continually: A major weakness of microblogging is that it leads to people forming opinions on the basis of 40-word tweets, status updates and what other people are saying rather than about the original information. In fact, Facebook has now gone as far as removing the number of likes on a status update. But it is clear that small bites of information work. To establish and maintain its status as a source of reliable information and opinion, we need regular and frequent updates
(pictures, quotes, article headlines, hyperlinks, polls on topical issues etc) to attract and retain audiences.

**Engaging our leadership:** Our new media eco-system should give us an opportunity to bring our office-bearers, our CC and PB members, and our provincial, district and even branch leaderships to our membership – and to a broader public. We need to develop a system in which our leaders engage regularly with our audiences – through short audio and view and transcribed interviews and statements on our platforms. They can speak on SACP decisions, particularly during and after major decision-making events – congresses, CC, PEC and DEC meetings and so on. It will be in the Party's interest, but also in that of working class audiences for them to engage problematic views trending in social media, so that this does not become the preserve of a few faces at head office or amongst the officials, but of all the leaders.

**Dealing with confirmation bias:** The tendency to look for information that affirms one's view, the concept of confirmation bias, is apt when it comes to social media because the main purpose of these platforms is to sedate our 'radical exclusivity' and create us into Derbods' 'lonely crowds'. If we all 'think the same, we will all buy the same products, agree with the same propaganda and likely elect the same political party'. The role of the SACP must be to disrupt this anti-democratic and anti-thinking trends in social media, introducing new progressive and left ideas and opinions – and providing information produced from a socialist perspective. Our short tweets or Facebook postings must be linked to longer and more engaging articles in *Umsebenzi* and the AC.

**Opening doors to Party media:** None this should be read as proposing we close shop on our existing titles, *Umsebenzi* and the *African Communist*, or on the provincial Party titles that have emerged recently. We need to continue publishing these, although moving steadily towards digital-only forms – and possibly in formats similar to those on news websites (with
headlines and a few paragraphs that can be clicked on to open the entire article. But we also need to summarise the ideas, analyses and perspectives published in AC and Umsebenzi, to cut them into a sequential series the bite-sized chunks favoured by social media (and by its young audiences) to post on Twitter and similar platforms. In effect we propose enticing short-form readers into reading longer articles, dressed up as micro-blogs.

The challenge here is to develop the capacity to do this. There is not much additional production cost, but it will require additional human resources – activists dedicated to editorial production (writing, editing and packaging – the process of cutting long-form and complex articles into bite-sized chunks without compromising their integrity or crudifying their meaning). An ability to type fast is a minor aspect of the array of skills required to do this successfully. Introducing this component of our media will therefore have to progress slowly, keeping pace with the development of the requisite skills. It cannot, and should not, be done by deployees or activists as a secondary task. If we attempt to cut corners, the project will fail.

The 60th Anniversary of the African Communist is perhaps the most significant platform for the SACP to reflect on how it can use new and emerging media platforms to continue with the distribution of the message. This discussion should obviously not be devoid of the ideological issues that are attendant to questions of new media, and the kind of values, principles and more importantly – the socialist society that we want to build. The “new media” platforms that we seek to engage have been used to manipulate people’s perceptions and attitudes in electoral politics, in consumption patterns and preferences, in their ideas about democracy, world peace and issues of environmental protection. But more importantly, these are platforms that are aimed at advancing the capitalist society.

Does this mean that the SACP and its leadership should, as instructed by Bill Blunden, “turn on, tune in and drop out of social media”? Surely
these discussions did take place in the early years of the SACP in relation to the rise of the internet and the creation of a ‘global village’ and what our attitude is in using these ‘tools of capitalism’ for the mobilisation of our people. The authors’ believe we have no choice. As capital locates workers under one roof to exploit their labour power, but the workplace becomes a vital platform for them to organise, and mobilise to protect their class interests, we must use the venue of the ‘lonely crowds’ to organise and mobilise them into a conscious collective of interests.

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Endnotes
1. This process was extremely uneven – in the 1930s and early 40s in South Africa, the Party-aligned weekly The Guardian, comfortably outsold the Sunday Times for several years.
2. Political circumstances in South Africa tended to overshadow the growing gulf between media and its audiences. But it is notable that when in the late 1990s the Sowetan – which, post-1990, had become the country’s biggest ever daily newspaper – attempted to follow the economic aspirations of its executives by moving upmarket to target middle-class ‘black diamonds’, it lost more than half its daily audience in a matter of months.
60 WRITING YEARS

The African Communist – our weapon of choice

Lechesa Tsenoli sums up the learning value of the event held to mark the AC’s 60th anniversary

The opportunity to reflect on the 60th anniversary of the African Communist offers us an excellent space to look back in order to look ahead.

In a useful piece, a blurb, at the back of a book of dispatches by Karl Marx to the Sunday Tribune in the United States, Marxist journalist Isaac Deutscher wrote: “Awareness of historical perspective seems to me to provide the best antidote to pessimism as well as (to) extravagant optimism over the great problems of our time.”

This seminar offered that opportunity and what we heard proved the correctness of this observation.

The second reason the seminar was significant relates to what Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, in a book on Malaysia’s strategy during the Asian financial crisis said that in their culture, when you get lost, you retrace your steps so that you notice where you took the wrong turn on the path. He was explaining why they reintroduced exchange controls and thus effectively contained the negative financial crisis and emerged better than all other Asian countries from that crisis.

Revisiting the AC 60 years on has offered us an opportunity to similarly retrace our steps as well, to see where we may have missed the
turn, so to speak.

The third and related perspective, is to locate the AC inside of our organisational, and specifically battle of ideas, campaign against capitalism and the promotion of socialism.

The AC therefore should be seen in this context so that it is not seen in isolation from but as part of our theoretical contest, critiquing capitalism at one level, and at another, with Umsebenzi and other publications and pamphlets, to advance the overall work of the Party.

It became a useful tool in the hands of an academic, a worker, a civic leader generally grappling with understanding and applying Marxist-Leninism in their environment.

The quotation used by the ANC President, Cde Cyril Ramaphosa, and SACP General Secretary Cde Blade Nzimande, interestingly comes from the first edition of the AC published inside the country – the 1991 first quarter issue – following the unbanning of our organisations. It was edited by Brian and Sonia Bunting. The edition marked a triumphant presence inside the country after years of underground production, publication and distribution creatively disguised to hide its content.

Cde Brian was particularly proud that over time they had overcome the rather turgid, stuffy language they had started with, to make AC accessible to intellectuals and the working class activists alike.

He was reflecting the concerns about style of writing and speaking raised decades earlier by the Polish Party leader, Georgi Dimitrov (Selected Works, vol.2, p 106): “Many of our comrades think that the more high-sounding words and the more formulas, often unintelligible to the masses, they use, the better their agitation and propaganda, forgetting that the greatest leader and theoretician of the working class of our epoch, Lenin, has always spoken and written in highly popular language, readily understood by the masses.

“Every one of us must make this a law, a Bolshevik law, an elemen-
tary rule: “When writing or speaking, always have in mind the rank-
and-file worker who must understand you, must believe in your appeal
and be ready to follow you. You must have in mind those for whom you
write, to whom you speak.”

The AC represented, and potentially continues to, a powerful ideo-
logical, educational and political debating platform of the left. It cov-
ered domestic and international views of critical matters facing strug-
gles and the national democratic revolution.

When we travelled inside and outside the country during the strug-
gle, people continually asked us for the AC.

In Tanzania last year, a senior official of Chama Cha Mapinduzi, the
ruling party there said: “What happened to the AC? We miss it badly.”

Perhaps we should have reminded those of us who attended the 60th
anniversary seminar (held, appropriately at Liliesleaf, a revolutionary
hideout) that when Lenin spoke to a group of political educators, he
said: “You must never underestimate your task as political educators.
When done well, political education frees members of the Party and its
recipients (political education), of hearsay, gossip and rumour monger-
ing.” We should have stressed that our perspectives must arise from
concrete analysis of the concrete conditions. That our orientation must
tend to the scientific.

The legacy of the AC, the direction and leadership it provided un-
der difficult conditions, the creative manner it reached its recipients
in small and large units, in short as an instrument of organisation, an
ideological weapon in the battle of ideas, constitutes a bedrock of fur-
ther renewal and growth.

What can we learn from this practice and perhaps do differently to-
day?

This legacy also represented an inspiring, informative reflection on
revolutionary practice in other parts of the world, expanding our view
of what was possible, freed us from biases we carried as a result of our initial parochial and rather backward views about the world.

The literary review articles were fascinating reflections, often constituting combative engagement with published articles and books.

When there’s injustice anywhere, resistance is our duty and the AC remains one of our weapons of choice!

Cde Tsenoli is an SACP Central Committee and PB member and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly
60 WRITING YEARS

Producing AC and Umsebenzi today

Yunus Carrim looks back on his last 10 years as editor and co-editor of AC and Umsebenzi, and on the future of SACP publications

In the 50th Anniversary issue of the African Communist (AC), I wrote on the “Challenges in producing the African Communist and Umsebenzi today” (the African Communist, Issue 178, 3rd Quarter, 2009). That article covered my personal experiences of the banned literature of the SACP as a University of Durban-Westville student activist in the 1970s; my increasing concern about how unconditional the SACP’s support for the Soviet Union was; the greater relevance and value of our legal publications in the immediate period after our 1990 unbanning; and (by 2009) the challenges 15 years into our developing democracy in making our publications effective. Much of what was covered there, at least it seems to me, is of some or other relevance to the current period. And it would not do to repeat that, although I have drawn on the 2009 article a few times here. Still, this will be a very brief article. Essentially, it focuses on developments since 2009.

Of course, there are new developments. Perhaps the most profound is the dramatic surge in the use of social media and how it has come to eclipse print media – and the major role it has played in shaping people’s views and mobilising them to action, including through mass social protests, for both progressive and retrograde causes. Social me-
dia has certainly been more effective and faster in mobilising people to action than print media has usually been. This has huge implications for AC, Umsebenzi and other publications of the SACP.

As does another major development since 2009: the huge space social media provides for “fake news” and the power this has over people today, particularly young people. Many of them, certainly in our country, do not read the serious print media. It does not seem that they take much to in-depth news and features online either. They seem to prefer brief summaries, even maybe sound-bites, of the news. There is a very new reading culture since 2009. We are where we are. And, as the SACP, we are not responding adequately to this and are too caught up in churning out our publications mostly in the old, traditional way.

In the 2009 article it was said: “Essentially, Umsebenzi is meant to be a regular, popular, accessible newspaper that serves to inform, educate, entertain, empower, mobilise, organise and unite people in the cause of socialism. More specifically, Umsebenzi is meant to convey knowledge and information about SACP theories, perspectives, policies, strategies, tactics and campaigns, and encourage SACP members and others to offer their views on these and other issues. Umsebenzi seeks to be an organ of open, lively and vibrant debate. It is meant to be an organising tool of the Party. A key aspect of Umsebenzi’s role is to develop a broader continental and internationalist awareness, consciousness and solidarity by focusing on developments outside the country. Umsebenzi is also meant to communicate about the SACP to Left and progressive organisations in and outside the country.

“AC seeks to fulfil most of the goals that Umsebenzi is meant to. But, of course, AC is a journal, as against the paper that Umsebenzi is, and focuses more on theoretical, policy and strategic issues.”

While broadly these aims remain of value, we need to review the role of these publications; we need too to find new ways of reaching
people through AC and Umsebenzi, including through effectively using the social media space; and we need to work out what is do-able, given our particular resources and capacity.

We have begun haltingly to move in that direction. We are transitioning to publishing AC and Umsebenzi online only. In time, there’ll be no more print versions. There are three major issues here we are trying to deal with. One, the cost of data is too high, and so the large number of unemployed and low-income earners in the SACP and the broad ANC-led movement, and those outside interested in AC and Umsebenzi, will not be able to have access to them online. Two, what about the subscribers, many of whom prefer a hard copy? Three, what about libraries that have been stocking AC since 1959? But these are issues other publications that moved from print to online versions have also had to contend with – and we will have to too.

In the 2009 article it was noted: “So, in a nutshell, we will have to address at least the following issues to make progress over time:

**Making the AC and Umsebenzi more exciting and relevant to our times**

- Revitalising the culture of reading.
- Encouraging a culture of writing.
- Improving our distribution.
- Improving our financial situation.
- Working cooperatively with our Alliance partners to produce our media.
- Employing a full-time journalist.
- Appointing provincial correspondents.
- Using AC and Umsebenzi more effectively in our Party activities
- Encouraging comrades to write in the indigenous languages.
- Increasing coverage of our continent and international events more generally.”
Most of the issues are still in some or other form relevant. But there are also many new issues that have arisen. A few of them are covered in this article. Many other issues have been raised in the other articles in this issue of AC. We need to bring all these ideas and proposals – and act on them.

Despite all our challenges, we have produced an average of six issues Umsebenzi and three issues of AC over the past 10 years. Ideally, an issue of Umsebenzi should be 12 pages or 16 pages at most, given the current reading culture in our country and probably globally. Issues of Umsebenzi have probably averaged 20 pages. Ideally, an AC should not exceed 50 pages. On average AC has been about 100 pages. In fact, the current one is 93 pages. So in effect most of these issues are “double issues”. And if the target of eight issues of Umsebenzi and four AC’s a year is not, for a variety of reasons, being attained, the number of pages of those that are published amounts to more or less the same number of pages as achieving these targets would have had. Still, it is better that we publish more copies of Umsebenzi and AC with fewer pages than fewer issues with more pages.

Umsebenzi OnLine comes out regularly, and carries an article or two, usually on more immediate issues. The exact relationship between the regular Umsebenzi OnLine articles and the issues of the Umsebenzi that are printed and will in the near future only appear in digital form is currently being clarified.

Clearly, we need to do far more, far quicker, far more efficiently to get key messages in Umsebenzi and AC in the social media space, including through Facebook and Twitter. This is our major failing – and one to which we are paying the most attention. The possibilities for inserting key issues in articles from AC and Umsebenzi in the social media space are dealt with in other articles in this issue of AC. It is our success in penetrating this area that will be an important measure of how effec-
It is also important to get summaries of our key articles in AC and Umsebenzi into the establishment media, both on line and in print. Those who write in our publications should also write other articles in the establishment media. Not enough, certainly, of this is being done. Editorial Board members should be leading in this.

The need to actively use social media and publish Umsebenzi and AC only digitally means that we will not be able to use them to make direct physical contact with people, as has traditionally been the case. Not that much of this has been happening in the post 1994 period. But direct contact with people, especially workers, especially at their workplaces, was a very important means of mobilising and organising and recruiting members, and contributing to their political education. It was very much a part of the socialist ethos. As much as organising through social media is crucial, and can be very effective, for a communist party, having direct personal contact with workers and others is surely fundamental? Can social media and online publications ever really be a substitute for that?

A major weakness is our inability to get YCLSA members to write for AC and Umsebenzi. From 2009, the YReds section of Umsebenzi petered out and eventually disappeared altogether. This issue is being given attention– but there needs to be progress.

Following the 2017 SACP 14th National Congress, we restructured the Editorial Board to provide for more board members to become involved in the editing. There are now two editors and two deputy editors –three from among this “quartet” take responsibility for the editing and one co-ordinates AC and Umsebenzi social media. The SACP General Secretary remains the editor-in-chief and the two Deputy General Secretaries the deputy-editors-in-chief.

We have three sub-editors who do the final technical edits after the
political edits are done. The lay-out and presentation of Umsebenzi is highly professional, and given our limited resources, utterly remarkable; it could even be said that the A4 version of Umsebenzi is often stunning in form. And for, this we owe a huge debt to the hardworking, always available, innovative team of David Niddrie, Tony Sutton and Mark Waller.

In the 2009 article, it was noted: “Of course, these are very different times from the underground period and the early 1990s, and the AC cannot be as resonant today as it was in those periods. But we could do better. Sadly, our African and international focus has receded. We get very few articles from activists involved in struggles in other countries on the continent and elsewhere. …We’re doing fine. But why aren’t we doing better? Partly, it would seem, it’s the changed times. The success of the AC in previous periods is partly related to the context of the times – the strenuous and exciting challenges of the underground period and then, later, the early 90s. These are, quite simply, less exciting times. Or that’s how they are seen. While the challenges of transformation persist, comrades are not as driven as in previous contexts. There is less interest in issues of theory and policy and strategy than before....” Much of this remains relevant, it would seem.

But, hey, despite all the ups and downs, AC has survived for 60 years! And it continues to resonate! This is a remarkable achievement! In the ANC-led Alliance, it’s the only publication that has endured. And just how many other communist party publications globally have? Even the World Marxist Review has not survived into this century. So our survival has to be celebrated! And even more – our strong prospects of continuing to survive, in whatever form, into the future.

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