

Scoring an own-goal

Peter Dwyer

South Africa is revolting. Since May 2009 there has been a wave of uninterrupted township as police clash on an almost weekly basis with unemployed protestors and striking workers. A recent estimate counts 63 major 'service delivery' protests since January 2009 with 24 percent of protests taking place in Guateng and 19 percent in the Western Cape and Mpumalanga. As the protests continue, increasing strain is being put on the Tripartite Alliance as some African National Congress (ANC) leaders in national and provincial government have accused the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO) of being behind violent protests.

What are misleadingly called 'service delivery' protests have been about a wide range of issues and have included the working poor, the unemployed and students protesting about increased student fees at campuses across the country from Cape Town to Johannesburg. In October in Gugulethu up to 2000 people protested about the lack of jobs being created for local people at a new Square Mall that recently opened. To the far north in Nelspruit people protested outside the 2010 Mbombela stadium at 6am demanding that the government build them a school they were promised when they were relocated to make way for the World Cup stadium. And still the protests erupt and spread. During the past several weeks Sakhile informal settlement in Standerton has been rocked by violent protests culminating in an incredible 10,000 people marching to hand over a memorandum to the local council.

What is in part fascinating about this wave of protests and strikes is that they come just months after the April re-election of the African National Congress (ANC) and the new President Jacob Zuma. He was seen by many, particularly his supporters in COSATU the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)

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and the South African Communist Party (SACP) as representing a new start for the ANC government after 12 years of neoliberal policies imposed by former President Thabo Mbeki. The belief in Zuma as a fresh start has not been missed. One protestor Sandile Mahlangu claimed "President Zuma promised to rid government of corruption and lazy officials".

The township protests coincided with an outbreak of national strikes. These latest strikes followed the month long strike in June 2007 that was the longest and largest public-sector strike in the history of South Africa and included over 700,000 workers on strike and another 300,000, for whom it was illegal to strike, taking part in militant marches, pickets and other forms of protest. In August 2008 another general strike brought the economy to a standstill when COSATU called its two million members out on a one-day strike in protest of rising prices of food and fuel. This strike followed an announcement that electricity prices would increase by 27.5 percent. Since the start of 2009 there have been 24 officially recorded major protests across the country and government officials believe that the rate of protests this year will exceed those for 2007 and 2008.

Although South Africa is Africa's most successful economy (it contributes a third of all sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries), not everyone has benefitted equally. Since the late 1990s South Africa's economy has grown at 6 percent each year and inflation has been reduced to around 6 per cent, on a par with other similar economies. Yet this has been done through introducing neoliberal policies with tight control over public spending and service delivery, that has hit the poorest hardest as money has been diverted from public spending into tax cuts for the rich and middle class. Increases in government budget allocations have come not through some fundamental shift in macroeconomic policy but through emphasising fiscal efficiency. Such 'efficiency

savings', argue COSATU and others, are at the expense of social spending for the working class.

Yet the ANC government has found the money to line the pockets of big business through billions of pounds of tax cuts as they have reduced corporation tax from 50 percent in the early 1990s to less than 30 percent today. The growth in the economy in the last few years is linked to the growth in global demand, particularly from China, for South African manufacturing and primary commodities. As elsewhere in the world this coincided with a financial and speculative boom resulting in property prices rocketing by 400 per cent – higher than the rise in property prices in the USA and Ireland. Whilst there has been investment in infrastructure, this has been money based on Private Finance Initiatives similar those in the UK, with money ploughed into tourist projects such as the football stadiums for the 2010 World Cup, the controversial World Bank backed Lesoto Highlands Water Project and an elitist fast rail service (that avoids Soweto) between Johannesburg and Pretoria that will largely service rich and middle class commuters.

Although the proportion of people living below the poverty line dropped from 58 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2005 and many families have access to social grants and other poverty alleviation programmes, many households and communities remain trapped in poverty. Some 75 percent of African children lived in income poverty in 2007, compared to 43 percent of 'coloured' children, 14 percent of Indian children and 5 percent of white children. Little wonder that South Africa is a country in turmoil as the anger and bitterness of shattered dreams of liberation eats away at the very fabric of society. It is an anger that is also expressed in the average of 50 people a day murdered and high levels of child abuse and rape. Although crime figures have fallen over the past several years, they are still high by international standards

Between 2003 and 2006, the number of days lost to strikes rose from 500,000 to 2.6 million, most of which took place in 2006. June 2007 witnessed the largest strike in South Africa history. It lasted four weeks, with 11 million strike days lost as public sector workers marched and struck and an underlying current of which was a growing antipathy towards the ANC leadership.

The government claims to have built over two million new houses but there are still 2000 informal settlements across South Africa, in which people live without sanitation and electricity in shacks made of corrugated iron and waste materials. On average there are 10 shack fires a day killing several hundred people a year. These disasters devastate the lives of all concerned, putting young children, the old and disabled people particularly at risk and making the poor and vulnerable destitute. Life in the shacks is one of permanent drudgery as one shackdweller Funake Mkhwambi told how 'My shack gets flooded every year. I have to move every winter to stay with my cousins elsewhere. We are a family of 8, including 5 children who often get sick because of the cold and dirty water'.

Two sets of figures released in October 2009 reveal much about South Africa one of the most unequal countries on earth. The Sunday Times annual rich list shows that despite the recession '... executives are pocketing all sorts of additional bonuses and making mega-profits on unacceptably generous share options. This is in addition to huge basic salaries and performance bonuses, with bonuses still being earned by many despite the nonperformance of their companies'.

At the same time the Labour Force Survey shows that 1 million jobs have been lost in the last year with official unemployment put at 24.5 per cent but many in civil society put the figure at over 40 percent. A figure that will continue to rise as the global economic crisis starts to bite in a country whose recent economic fortunes have been built on demand for commodities such as coal, gold and platinum.

Little wonder that the demand for jobs and decent wages is at the heart of calls from township protestors and striking workers alike and a growing unemployed peoples movement organises mass thefts of basic foodstuffs in cities such as Durban. This is a country in which one worker feeds on average another 5 members of the family. In a country in which the every other

18-24 year old is unemployed a cursory glance at the media coverage reveals poor, hungry, angry faces. Yet having promised to create 500,000 jobs in a recent state of the nation address, President Zuma retracted and stated that 'These are not the permanent jobs the economy should create but opportunities that should help our people survive in the short term'. And already analysts are already talking of, when it comes, a job-less recovery.

To understand today's protests and strikes it is important to understand the significance of the election of Jacob Zuma and the expectations he unleashed. But it was an earlier rising tide of worker and township militancy that he deftly rode so enabling him to win the presidency of the ANC. By 2006 there were on average approximately 6,000 township and community protests a year across the country. These were largely local-based revolts against the failure of the ANC government to satisfy 'service delivery' demands. These revolts occurred at a greater rate than any other country in the world. But important in which have also been the independent 'social movements' typified by the Anti-Privatization Forum who have emerged since 1999 largely as an attempt to coordinate struggles against the ANC's relentless commodification and privatization of basic services and produced the first cracks in the ANC monolith, proving that you can challenge the ANC's commitment to neo-liberalism. But it was the recent strikes that destroyed Mbeki that breathed new life into the left inside the Alliance.

Despite being written off by many commentators on the left as 'bought off' or 'tied to the apron strings of the ANC' there has been a revival of the organised working class. A significant turning point was the 2006 violent security guard and cleaners strike that in some cases went beyond the control of the trade union leaders and began, however falteringly, to show signs of independent rank and file action.

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Paradoxically, it was during this period that COSATU's role in the Alliance led some activists on the left to discount the role of the working class – some even repeating the 1970s theory about the unionised representing a 'labour aristocracy'. If this was the case, what sense could possibly be made of the strikes at the level of political analysis, let alone political engagement?

What is clear is that political transformations have followed from labour struggles. So the last important event came in December 2007 at the ANC Polokwane congress. The writing was on the wall for Mbeki, the coup against him only a matter of time. In short these events, notably the uprisings and strikes - represented a revolt against Mbeki's neo-liberalism. A revolt that catapulted Zuma to the head of the ANC. Some on the left missed how the rising militancy reverberated inside the ANC and argued that Mbeki was replaced as president due to the internal conflicts. But the conflicts inside the ANC reflect the anger and frustration with ANC neoliberal policies and Mbeki's fate was not sealed by internal party manoeuvres but by general strikes and protests in recent years that Zuma cleverly latched on to with help from the SACP and COSATU. By seeming to victimise Zuma, Mbeki enhanced his popularity and created a new leader for millions of disaffected people.

Zuma unlike Mbeki is seen as a 'man of the people' and a friend of the workers who is willing to listen to the trade unions. Touted as a leftist by his supporters, he sounds more like a US Republican, said one newspaper columnist, as he calls for tougher action against crime and freer markets. Prior to his election as president one of Zuma's closest advisers, former trade union leader Gwede Mantashe, met with investors in Cape Town and stressed the ways to accelerate

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South Africa's rate of investment, fight crime and provide a progressive social safety net. He said that under President Zuma's leadership 'this isn't about business versus the poor, it's about creating an environment for business while tending to the needs of the poor.' At one point prior to his election Zuma talked of establishing a 'pact' between businesses, government and unions to address low wages, strikes and inflation. Yet this has already been shattered by the strikes and protests and instead of bringing social peace, the Financial Times has noted 'There is an ugly, unpredictable mood among South Africa's poor'.

It is this mood of militancy; militant strikes and the township protests over the last few years that have had the cumulative effect of blowing apart the neo-liberal consensus in the Alliance. With the election of Jacob Zuma as president many hoped that this would usher in a new period of social stability. 15 years of ANC rule have seen South Africa become the most unequal country in the world but also the protest capital of the world. In May 2008 government and police figures noted that between 1997 and 2008 there had been 8695 violent or unrest-related crowd management incidents and 84, 487 peaceful demonstrations or peaceful crowd management incidents.

The difference this time is that whilst previous pro-

tests have focused on issues such as lack of water and housing, the recent protests have been more generalised and more violent. As protestor Mzonke Poni told reporters 'Whenever the ANC government fails to deliver, it comes up with excuses and blames it on individuals. It's true that its councillors lack commitment and skills, but it is the national leadership that is also to blame – and meanwhile people have to suffer. The only way the government notices us is when we express our anger and rage. Then they understand how we feel.' The protests and strikes caught many people by surprise with some commentators expressing disbelief at the level of political anger at a government elected just three months before with 66 per cent of the vote. As one commentator said about South Africa 'They just don't vote they throw bricks as well'. Unless something drastic is done then the bricks look set to be thrown in the future as residents involved in the latest out break of protests in Eldorado Park in Johannesburg threatened "We will protest at the stadiums (of the 2010 World Cup) so the tourists can see how bad we have it here" said Hilton Cannell a member of the resident's housing committee. By focusing much of its capital infrastructure spending on the World Cup in the hope that it would trickle down to the unemployed and working poor the government increasingly looks like it has scored an own-goal.