

South Africa's Trade Unions and Counter-Hegemony  
A Great Idea Whose Time Came ... and Passed

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South Africa's transition from apartheid-capitalism to neo-liberal capitalism was no simple happenstance. It was an intensely contested political process, one that illustrates an enduring dilemma for organized labour: how to seize opportunities to improve the social conditions of the working class. If the trade union leadership identifies too closely with the need to compromise in order to achieve core objectives, they may be less likely to meet those core objectives and worse, may weaken the cohesiveness and internal democracy of the labour movement. But if they eschew compromises when there are opportunities to significantly improve the lives of their members, they may be abandoned as out of touch. Developing a counter-hegemonic strategy presents a third approach, promising a way to build working class power, confidence, capacity and creativity to imagine alternatives.

In the 1990s, some of South Africa's leading trade unionists did try to develop neo-Gramscian-type counter-hegemonic practices<sup>1</sup> to pursue a strategy for socialist transformation in response to the reconfirmation of the country's economic base during its political transition process. But as I argue in this paper, despite the importance of socialist and counter-hegemonic discourses in cementing a bond among the leadership and between the leaders and the members, the dominant strategy for organized labour's main trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), was to press for the inclusion of organized labour in South Africa's new hegemonic bloc rather than developing counter-hegemonic practices. This strategy was largely unsuccessful, however, as organized labour and the working class more generally soon saw itself excluded from the ruling bloc and unable to influence the government's new program that privileged capital in a variety of ways. In response, recent years have seen growing protests throughout the country. But although there has been some union involvement and some strategic alliances with other emerging protest movements, it appears that the trade unions have neither the will nor the capacity to help pull together the inchoate anti-hegemonic movements into a counter-hegemonic strategy that has transformative potential. Indeed, despite their many disappointments since 1994, COSATU still aims to achieve a reconfiguration of the ruling basis of the government to incorporate the working class into a hegemonic bloc rather than building a counter-hegemonic politics.

#### Labour and counter-hegemony

By 1989, the cross-class African National Congress (ANC) was committed to negotiating a new political dispensation in South Africa characterized by full citizenship and democratic rights and was willing for it to be anchored by a capitalist economy. This meant the matter of organizing

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<sup>1</sup> See Carroll and Ratner for an explanation of the difference between Leninist, Gramscian and radical pluralist/post-modern conceptions of counter-hegemony. William K Carroll and R S Ratner, "Between Leninism and Radical Pluralism: Gramscian Reflections on Counter-Hegemony and the New Social Movements," *Critical Sociology* 20.2 (1994): pp. 3-26.

consent for the new capitalist order would be a central challenge for South Africa's new government. The ANC was politically linked to the South African Communist Party (SACP) and COSATU, both of them committed to a socialist future for South Africa, in a Tripartite Alliance. The post-apartheid government would have to reconcile South Africa's liberation movement not just to the preservation of capitalism in general but to the continuation, at least over the short term, of a specific ownership structure that had prevailed during apartheid. In fact, one of the first orders of business would be to inspire the restructuring of the economy for renewed profitability in the hopes of new investment and rejuvenated economic growth.

Organizing consent for capitalist renewal would be no simple matter, however, since there was a widely held perception that the private sector had not only benefitted from apartheid but colluded with the racist political regime. Neo-Gramscian analyses pinpoint the centrality of hegemony – organizing consent – to governance in modern capitalist society. Carroll and Ratner explain: “In the modern era, formal freedoms and electoral rights exist alongside the class inequalities of the bourgeois state; therefore, relations of domination need to be sustained with the consent of the dominated.”<sup>2</sup> The transition to non-racial democracy in South Africa was a gamble on the part of elements of the previous ruling bloc that the majority could be reconciled to capitalism – and an acknowledgement that more overt forms of domination (culminating in a five-year ‘state of emergency’ during the 1980s) were no longer viable. The challenge for the post-apartheid government would be to ensure that these political changes and economic continuities were legitimized by new norms and values, for, as Carroll and Ratner continue, “consent does not arise spontaneously; it must be won through ideological struggles and material concessions. By these means, a general interest or collective identity is constructed that unites the dominant and subordinate alike as members of the same political community.”<sup>3</sup>

The ANC and the SACP previously had been able to reconcile their divergent long-term objectives by merging them in a two-stage revolutionary strategy. The two agreed that a ‘national democratic revolution’ would have to take place to consolidate non-racial capitalist hegemony before the struggle for socialism became a relevant objective. But with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the repudiation of ‘actually existing’ socialism, a number of prominent socialists in South Africa spent the early 1990s rethinking their long-held ideas about how to build a socialist society and even what socialism was. Specifically, the notion of pursuing socialism by seeking to capture the state and use its coercive powers to transform the economy and society was very much in question. There was a general sense that the revolutionary route to socialism had produced states that were authoritarian and failed to do much better than capitalism (at least a reformist, redistributive capitalism) to meet the basic needs of the working class. In addition to concerns about its palatability, there was a perception that a revolutionary route to socialism was not viable. As South African analyst Karl von Holdt argued, the nature of the state in late 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa was complex, with great financial, technical, military and ideological resources, one that was not amenable to ‘capture.’<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Carroll and Ratner, “Between Leninism and Radical Pluralism,” p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Carroll and Ratner, “Between Leninism and Radical Pluralism,” pp. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Karl von Holdt, “Insurrection, Negotiation and ‘War of Position,’” *South African Labour Bulletin* 15.3 (September 1990): p. 13.

In this context, discourses of counter-hegemony gained prominence in South Africa. Gramsci's writings, and those drawing upon his work posit two routes to socialism: via a revolutionary capture of the state (war of movement) or via the socialist transformation of society in a counter-hegemonic strategy prior to assuming (and reconfiguring) the state (initially a war of position).<sup>5</sup> From a neo-Gramscian perspective, if capitalism is deeply embedded in the institutions and norms of a society, socialists must wage a 'war of position' to establish widespread counter-hegemonic practices before seeking to capture the state. The idea of pursuing a 'war of position' was particularly appealing because it seemed to promise a non-authoritarian socialism, as well as reaffirming the relevance of socialist struggle despite the capitalist and liberal-democratic nature of the South African transition. Such an approach thus addressed both the ethical and practical challenges of building socialism in South Africa and presented important continuities with the struggle against apartheid, especially domestic 'ungovernability' strategies.

There were clear signs that this type of approach shaped aspects of the politics both of the SACP and of COSATU. SACP leader Joe Slovo's 1990 treatise "Has Socialism Failed?" argued that "conditions must be created making possible full popular control over all society's institutions of power, not just as a 'constitutional right' but as a reality."<sup>6</sup> Socialism was not just a strategy for the future, it was a set of social practices to begin in the present. 'Socialism is the Future – Build it Now!' soon became the party's slogan. Slovo's pamphlet inspired serious discussion about the relationship between democracy, participation and socialism. SACP members were joined by activists associated with COSATU (some involved in both organizations) who were seeking ways to blend the trade unions' participatory grassroots, shopfloor and community struggles with a socialist vision. By the early 1990s, leading trade unionists like Adrienne Bird and Geoff Schreiner were merging Slovo's vision and Gramsci's theories with the tradition of shop-floor organizing strategies: "Moving towards socialist democracy requires an ongoing process of empowering institutions and organizations, outside the state, to participate in the decision making process and thereby to exercise meaningful control over that state between elections."<sup>7</sup> Prominent trade union official Enoch Godongwana similarly said: "I argue for restructuring which is informed by a socialist perspective and which is characterised by working class politics and democratic practice and accountability of leadership."<sup>8</sup> Other key South African unionists and associated thinkers, researchers and strategists premised their conceptualization of trade union politics, which they called radical reformism or strategic unionism, along similar lines. One called it: "a strategy that envisages a far-reaching transformation of the state, of the workplace, of economic decision-making and of the texture of civil society, a transformation driven by a broad based coalition of interest groups, at the centre of which is the labour movement."<sup>9</sup>

Proponents of 'strategic unionism' sought to develop the effectiveness and coherence of trade unions as agents in the economic restructuring decisions that would inevitably affect their

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<sup>5</sup> Anne Showstack Sassoon, "A Gramsci Dictionary," *Approaches to Gramsci*, ed. Anne Showstack Sassoon (London: Writers and Readers, 1982): pp. 16-17.

<sup>6</sup> Joe Slovo, "Has Socialism Failed?" (London: Inkululenko Publications, 1990), pp. 20, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Bird and Geoff Schreiner, "COSATU at the Crossroads: towards tripartite corporatism or democratic socialism?" *South African Labour Bulletin* 16.6 (1992): p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Enoch Godongwana, "Industrial Restructuring and the Social Contract: Reforming Capitalism or Building Blocks for Socialism?" *South African Labour Bulletin* 16.4 (March/April 1992): p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Karl von Holdt, "Strategic Unionism: The Debate," *Southern Africa Report* 8.3-4 (January-February 1993): p. 36.

members. The ascendance of global neo-liberalism and its implications for South Africa, which had only begun to embark upon global integration or neo-liberal restructuring in 1989, heightened the urgency of developing a trade union strategy. They envisioned a program to extend the arena of and means for class struggle and working class empowerment: “strategic unionism premises the ensuring of transformation by developing a step by step programme of radical reforms – each of which extends the arena of democratic decision making and deepens the power of the working class.”<sup>10</sup> These reforms promised to usher in new social relationships and social practices, new ways of organizing collective decision-making over the economy and over society that contained the seeds of further reform.

John Saul drew on André Gorz and a number of South African sources to articulate the concept ‘structural reform,’ which he suggested could “help make greater analytical sense of such ‘socialist’ struggles as are occurring in contemporary South Africa.”<sup>11</sup> Gorz had offered the following example to illustrate how reforms could hold the potential for broader transformation:

Is it reformist ... to demand the construction of 500,000 new housing units a year ...? It is impossible to know beforehand. One would have to decide first whether the proposed housing program would mean the expropriation of those who own the required land, and whether the construction would be a socialized public service, thus destroying an important center of the accumulation of private capital; or if, on the contrary, this would mean subsidizing private enterprise with taxpayers’ money to guarantee profits. One must also know whether the intention is to build workers’ housing anywhere that land and materials can be cheaply bought, or if it is to construct lodgings as well as new industry according to optimum human and social criteria. Depending on the case, the proposal of 500,000 housing units will be either neo-capitalist or anti-capitalist.<sup>12</sup>

For Saul, as for Gorz, the starting point of ‘structural reform’ was the material needs of the working class constituency – production must be reoriented to meet popular needs, like building materials, consumer durables, clothing and food for the domestic market. But structural reform did not operate merely in the realm of redistribution, seeking to rectify the worst shortcomings of capitalism. Saul argued that it must lead to a gradual rupture with the existing capitalist order by concerning itself with the organization of production and the ownership of property.<sup>13</sup> In order to forestall a situation in which reforms become ends in themselves (‘mere reformism’), Saul argued that structural reform must be ‘democratizing’ in the sense of genuinely empowering producers so that their power over what they produce was extended.

### Labour and hegemony

This radical vision of a counter-hegemonic strategy did not inform working class politics in South Africa, however, to any significant extent. COSATU and the SACP instead prioritized the incorporation of the working class, especially organized labour, in a new hegemonic bloc centred

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<sup>10</sup> Von Holdt, “Strategic Unionism,” p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> John S. Saul, *Recolonization and Resistance in Southern Africa in the 1990s* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1993): p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> André Gorz, *Strategy for Labour: A Radical Proposal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967 (1964)): p. 7, fn. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Saul, *Recolonization and Resistance*, pp. 143 - 167.

on the multi-class ANC. This meant developing a strategy to reform capitalism to better serve working class needs rather than seeking to build socialism. COSATU's decision to opt for 'mere reformism' became visible from very early on in the transition process (indeed at the same time that others in the movement were trying to articulate a counter-hegemonic strategy). But the federation's formal commitment to socialism made it difficult for the leadership to openly advocate capitalism, so COSATU's (and the SACP's) proposals were couched in a language that tried to reconcile reforming capitalism with socialist struggle, without stimulating the kind of debate that might have inspired a serious examination of the emerging strategy. For example, in 1990, Alex Erwin, perhaps the most prominent COSATU economist of the era, proposed that COSATU's economic strategy link a social democratic program with its support for socialism. Erwin argued that:

Our solutions lie neither in free market capitalism nor in centrally-planned command economy socialism. COSATU has a socialist conception of the economic policies which will be necessary to solve our economic problems.

... This means firstly that there must be particular, but not exclusive, development for the working class majority in our society. Secondly, central to our thinking is the development of democratic political structures that will entrench mass participation in formulating and implementing economic policy.

On these broad issues we are unashamedly socialist. But our challenge is to develop programmes that include the majority of South Africans, and that will build a productive, prosperous, ecologically stable and culturally vibrant society, where each and every citizen benefits in a meaningful way.<sup>14</sup>

The argument that social democratic reforms were a strategy for socialism has been widely contested in the literature on European social democracy. Most neo-Gramscians and other Marxists have argued that socialism via social democratic reform could only be a strategy to stabilize capitalism unless such reforms were components in an overall war of position. Critics showed that in practice, by emphasizing common interests between organized labour and capital, social democratic institutions and political practices dampened social conflict and revolutionary activity.<sup>15</sup> In Gramscian terms, the major accomplishment of a successful social democracy was to organize consent for capitalism by making enough concessions to buy stability and disorganize opposition. In this way, during the post-WWII social democratic period, key segments of the organized working class had been incorporated into the hegemonic bloc in much of Western Europe and even, to a lesser extent, in North America. If workers pushed for real participation in economic decision-making, however, they met strong resistance from the state and capital. Moreover, when neo-liberal ideas began to reshape these economies, organized labour was either immediately left out in the cold or forced to participate in a negotiated restructuring process that effectively disempowered the working class.

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<sup>14</sup> Alec Erwin, "South Africa's Post-Apartheid Economy: Planning for Prosperity," *South African Labour Bulletin* 14.6 (February 1990): pp. 41-42.

<sup>15</sup> Leo Panitch, *Working Class Politics in Crisis*, pp. 142-144; Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990): p. 12.

Despite Western Europe's history, the aspirations of organized labour in transitional South Africa took on a very similar character – explicitly pushing for inclusion of the working class in the hegemonic bloc. Thus COSATU sought to become a partner in the construction of a new program to reform capitalism – much like the social democracy of post-World War II Europe. Many visions of counter-hegemonic strategy developed prior to the historic 1994 elections actually placed the ANC at the centre, paradoxically presuming that once in government, the ANC would lead the creation of “an integrated, coherent socio-economic policy framework ... [that] seeks to mobilise all our people and all our country's resources toward the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future.”<sup>16</sup> What this really meant was that for most socialists and trade unionists, counter-hegemonic discourse was bound up with the politics of the transition era, and the ANC, as the historical bearer of the liberation struggle and heir-apparent to the South African state, was expected to frame a new hegemonic vision under majority rule. But the ANC had already committed to a capitalist economic transition – so it appeared COSATU and the SACP were accepting that commitment when they allowed the ANC to take political leadership.

The decision to pursue inclusion in a new hegemonic bloc rather than build counter-hegemonic practices was based, at least in part, on an expectation that the political alliance between the three would translate into real policy influence after 1994.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, one can only conclude that organized labour didn't really have a ‘counter-hegemonic strategy,’ or if it did, the strategy never became dominant within the labour movement, but rather, was successfully contested by key leaders who were not actually seeking a transition to socialism, but rather, hoping for a more labour-friendly, social-democratic capitalism.

### Labour and the hegemonic bloc

What is most striking about COSATU's decision to turn away from counter-hegemonic politics in favour of inclusion in a post-1994 hegemonic bloc ‘with a working class bias’ led by the ANC is that no such hegemonic bloc emerged, and indeed, organized labour (and the working class more generally) soon found that the emerging historic bloc was centred on a multi-racial middle class and globalized business interests. The post-apartheid basis of the South African state, therefore, can best be understood as a ‘passive revolution,’ shoring up the strongest segments of the capitalist class, the mining conglomerates and financial services, by incorporating elements of the black middle class but shutting out nationally-oriented manufacturing, the working class and the poor.<sup>18</sup> This outcome suggests that it was capital, rather than labour, that successfully pursued a ‘war of position,’ in the process winning the ANC leadership over to the perception that an economic restructuring program that served the particular interests of leading South African businesses would serve the needs of South Africa as a whole, while a program that met the demands of organized labour and the working class more generally would serve their

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<sup>16</sup> African National Congress, *Reconstruction and Development Programme* (Johannesburg: Umanyano Publications, 1994): p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Sakhela Behlungu, “From ‘Madiba Magic’ to ‘Mbeki Logic,’” *Thabo Mbeki's World*, ed. Sean Jacobs and Richard Calland (London: Zed, 2002): pp. 179-198.

<sup>18</sup> See Carolyn Bassett, “The Rainbow Nation and the New World Order: How Democracy Saved Six South African Conglomerates and Failed Thirty-Five Million People,” Presented at the Socialist Studies Congress, Winnipeg, June 2004. On the passive revolution, see Anne Showstack Sassoon, “Passive Revolution and the Politics of Reform,” *Approaches to Gramsci*, ed. Anne Showstack Sassoon (London: Writers and Readers, 1982): pp. 127-148.

particular interests alone, to the detriment of society more generally. Once COSATU recognized that the working classes were being marginalized and demobilized in the government's economic restructuring program, they recommitted their efforts to achieve working class inclusion in the emerging hegemonic bloc, but now by appealing to the ANC's good intentions rather than mobilizing their membership to press for change.

Until late 1996, COSATU sought to influence the Government of South Africa's economic program in two ways: first, by trying to secure the ANC's commitment to a jointly agreed economic restructuring and political program, the *Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)*, and second, by participating as part of a labour delegation at an economic policy forum, the National Economic Forum (NEF), which later became the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC). COSATU and the SACP both hoped that the *RDP*, which originated as a text written by COSATU for an election accord with the ANC and grew into a full-blown electoral program, would cement a new hegemonic bloc. The program was developed through a relatively participatory process, involving trade unionists, community activists, ANC and SACP members (though notably not capital) and went through numerous drafts. The outcome was a relatively populist document: "the first priority is to begin to meet the basic needs of people – jobs, land, housing, water, electricity, telecommunications, transport, a clean and healthy environment, nutrition, health care and social welfare."<sup>19</sup> To be sure, the *RDP* text contained many contradictory elements, including some signs of the ANC's growing commitment to a deflationary macro-economic framework. Nonetheless, its spirit, and much of its content, would have been violated by full-blown neo-liberalism and a hegemonic bloc centred on a multi-racial alliance of capital.

The relatively ambiguous framing of the *RDP* allowed COSATU and the SACP to continue to play the socialism card, with Philip Dexter, then General Secretary of a major public service union and prominent SACP member, arguing that "the *RDP* holds out the best prospects for putting socialism firmly on the agenda as an option that can serve the interests of the majority of people. ... The *RDP* is a site of struggle."<sup>20</sup> There were some concerns expressed, nonetheless, that opting for the *RDP* committed organized labour to shaping the terms of South Africa's post-apartheid hegemony rather than continuing with an independent socialist strategy. Karl von Holdt commented: "COSATU has chosen to help the ANC draft a broad programme for government that tries to anticipate and accommodate the interests of most forces in our society. In doing this, it has lost the opportunity to put forward a more powerful labour perspective and policy with which to clarify its own positions and challenge the rest of society."<sup>21</sup> Despite its imputed consistency with socialist aspirations, there was little question that the *RDP* was intended to inspire a new hegemonic vision by restructuring capitalism and redistributing income (not wealth) to improve the lives of the majority.

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<sup>19</sup> ANC, *Reconstruction and Development Programme*: pp. 6, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Dexter, "Make the *RDP* Make the Left," *Work in Progress* 95 (February-March 1994): pp. 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> Karl von Holdt, "COSATU Special Congress: The Uncertain New Era," *South African Labour Bulletin* 17.5 (September/October 1993): p. 23.

COSATU's demand for a "macro-economic negotiations forum," first made during a 1991 general strike protesting the outgoing decision to introduce a value-added tax,<sup>22</sup> similarly reflected a desire to shape the post-apartheid economic program. The National Economic Forum (NEF), comprised of equal delegations of organized labour, business and government representatives, was created late in 1992. From the beginning, some trade unionists claimed that there were counter-hegemonic possibilities in tripartite, corporatist policy bodies like the NEF, and even a social contract. Godongwana commented: "Socialism needs to transcend social democracy. We need to approach the debate on social contracts creatively, guided by a socialist perspective and working class democratic practices such as accountability of leadership, mandates, reports and mass action if demands are not met. There must be no compromise on fundamental issues."<sup>23</sup>

But COSATU's behaviour at the NEF and at its successor, the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), again demonstrated the federation's over-riding desire to participate in the elaboration of a hegemonic project for post-apartheid South Africa, which ultimately came at a price of its own exclusion from the emerging hegemonic bloc. In fact, the labour delegation directly participated in a number of policy decisions, and acquiesced in others, that opened the way for relatively unalloyed neo-liberal restructuring. COSATU permitted the NEF to consider South Africa's new offer to GATT on an 'emergency' basis, derailing its own proposal that trade liberalization occur only after industrial restructuring measures to preserve jobs and create new employment were in place. COSATU uncritically agreed that a government delegation which included ANC delegates would negotiate an \$850 million (US) loan in 1993 from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to consolidate the country's debt and did not raise major objections either to the fact that the outgoing apartheid regime was agreeing to loan conditions, or to the fairly stringent conditions attached to the loan (unusually so for a country that was comfortably servicing its debt). COSATU colluded in upholding the secrecy attached to the entire process and to the specifics of the loan's policy conditions, rather than ensuring that its membership and other South Africans could be involved in a public debate about the conditions attached to the loan agreement that was being negotiated on their behalf and would bind the future government.<sup>24</sup>

Despite this experience with the ANC at the NEF, trade union leaders hoped that the relationship would change after the 1994 elections, when the labour delegation led by COSATU and the government delegation led by the ANC would be able to use the NEF as an institution to promote the *RDP* vision. This seemed to be coming to fruition when the NEF's successor, NEDLAC, was established 1995, as "the key body to build consensus on economic and development policy and mobilise the entire South African society behind these objectives of the *RDP*."<sup>25</sup> But instead, the new ANC-led government extended its overall central control of the policy process and marginalized NEDLAC. Meanwhile, the *RDP* influenced ANC policy far less

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<sup>22</sup> "National General Strike: "It's More than the VAT, It's the Entire Economy," Interview with Jay Naidoo," *South African Labour Bulletin* 16.2 (October/November 1991): p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Godongwana, "Industrial Restructuring and the Social Contract" p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Vishnu Padayachee, "Debt, Development and Democracy: The IMF in Post-apartheid South Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 62 (December 1994); Vishnu Padayachee, "Dealing with the IMF: Dangers and Opportunities," *South African Labour Bulletin* 18.1 (January/February 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Government of South Africa, "White Paper on Reconstruction and Development," Government Gazette #16085, Office of the President, November 1994: p. 39.



than expected. Though an *RDP* office was created in 1994 and headed by ex-COSATU General Secretary Jay Naidoo, many Cabinet ministers and their staffs were ambivalent about proposed *RDP*-friendly projects, including Deputy President Thabo Mbeki's and even President Nelson Mandela. The new government therefore fought the *RDP* rather than promoting it.<sup>26</sup>

In early 1996, after a torrent of media and senior policy-maker criticisms about the effectiveness of the office, the government announced, without discussing the matter with its Alliance partners first, that it was shutting down the *RDP* Ministry.<sup>27</sup> The content of the program was substantially rewritten, first in the 1994 *RDP* White Paper, then the National Growth and Development Strategy, and by June 1996 in the unapologetically neo-liberal *Growth, Employment and Redistribution Strategy* (GEAR), once again without consulting the Tripartite Alliance. Under the new neo-liberal restructuring strategy, social rights were actively downgraded and redistribution was placed on the back-burner in an attempt to re-secure the conditions for capital accumulation. By 1999 the *RDP* was little more to the ANC than a hollow, albeit still effective, electoral slogan.

Faced with a political ally that had opted for an economic restructuring program that was devastating to the working class, the COSATU and SACP leadership attempted to rejuvenate Alliance politics in order to regain some sway over the government. In November 1996, COSATU presented a discussion paper, the *Draft Programme for the Alliance*, to the ANC. The paper criticized the way GEAR had been formulated and introduced, and said the government was making policy with little reference to Alliance structures or its mass membership. The paper and subsequent discussions sought to bring the ANC back to the centre of a 'popular bloc,' pitted against a 'minority bloc' of capital, the state bureaucracy, the armed forces, parastatals and the central bank that were seeking to preserve the privileges acquired during the apartheid years. COSATU called for the Alliance to agree to a common program for social transformation – again based on the *RDP* – and a common strategy for implementing it. Such a program, COSATU argued,

would remove the impression that government is acting as a neutral referee, sitting above the other players in society. Rather, the mass bias of the government, and its commitment to the implementation of a particular programme, would be the lodestar which would clearly reflect the mandate of the majority party. The Alliance would therefore openly mobilise people for the implementation and defence of agreed programmes at the level of Parliament, NEDLAC and other areas of governance.<sup>28</sup>

This proposal was unmistakably a reiteration of the call for a hegemonic bloc that incorporated COSATU and the ANC's broader, working class constituency.

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<sup>26</sup> Graeme Götz, "Shoot Anything That Flies, Claim Anything That Falls: Labour and the Changing Definition of the Reconstruction and Development Programme," *Trade Unions and Democratization in South Africa, 1985-1997*, ed. Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Dale T McKinley, "COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994," unpublished paper presented at the Department of Sociology, Rand Afrikaanse University, October 3, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> COSATU, "A Draft Programme for the Alliance," sect. 7.7.

The *Draft Programme* formed the basis for a series of discussions aimed at keeping the Alliance together. A breakthrough was reported after a meeting between the top leaders of the ANC, SACP and COSATU, when it was announced that the government position had been revised and that GEAR was no longer ‘cast in stone.’<sup>29</sup> Although the ANC did not repudiate GEAR, it promised that in future, economic programs would be discussed within the Alliance before they were announced in order to avoid acrimonious public debates. At minimum, the summit seemed to confirm the commitment of all parties to maintain the Alliance, to smooth over some differences, and to signal that in future, such differences would be dealt with in Alliance structures rather than tripartite forums or the media.

But the ANC’s interpretation of the agreement was that neither COSATU nor the SACP should criticize ANC policies publicly in the future and that any disagreements should be worked out among senior leaders behind closed doors. At COSATU’s 1999 Special Congress, Cabinet Minister Terror Lekota, speaking on behalf of President Thabo Mbeki, told the assembled labour delegates that:

The recent trend, on the part of some highly-placed comrades, of ascending platforms or by other ways criticising or agitating against policies and actions of the movement, inside and outside Government, smacks of a lack of revolutionary discipline. ... This undisciplined approach has a number of negative consequences: It confuses the mass based support of our movement; it lends itself to exploitation by our opponents and opposition parties; it creates a climate in which agents provocateur can thrive and advance their counter-revolutionary agendas.<sup>30</sup>

Ongoing criticism of GEAR led government ministers to accuse both organizations of undermining the ‘national democratic revolution.’ The notion of a two-stage revolutionary process was forcefully rearticulated by the ANC, and both COSATU and the SACP were called upon to get behind the national democratic revolution without seeking other objectives until the ‘first stage’ of the revolution was complete. Meanwhile, the government publicly confronted and humiliated COSATU, for example, by unilaterally forcing a wage settlement on public sector workers in the middle of a legal collective bargaining process and altering a major piece of labour legislation that had been agreed through NEDLAC.<sup>31</sup> “A war has been declared,” COSATU’s new General Secretary Zwelinzima Vavi responded with regard to the latter, “and we shall respond accordingly.”<sup>32</sup>

### Counter-hegemonics

The period after the June 1996 announcement of GEAR saw a rise in protest politics by COSATU, with the federation calling major anti-GEAR and anti-privatization general strikes in May 2000 and August 2001. Increasingly, these protests have been framed against the

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<sup>29</sup> ANC, “Statement of the Alliance Summit,” September 1, 1997; Reneé Grawitzky, “ANC softens stance over Gear debate,” *Business Day* September 3, 1997.

<sup>30</sup> Terror Lekotha, ANC Chairperson, “Address to the COSATU Special Congress, August 18, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Marlea Clarke and Carolyn Bassett, “Alliance Woes: COSATU Pays the Price,” *Southern Africa Report* 15.1 (December 1999).

<sup>32</sup> COSATU, “Press Statement on the Ministerial Determination for Small Business,” November 4 1999.

government – or at least government policies – instead of the ‘old order’ of established big business and white privilege. The same period saw a significant rise in grass-roots protest movements throughout the country – activists and health workers seeking treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS; neighbourhood movements focused on housing and community services; and many more. These movements also were responding to the failure of the government to live up to its commitment to improve social rights: as Hein Marais commented, “society remains tragically polarized – not least along the lines of income and access to services – while the gulf of structural inequality appears to be widening.”<sup>33</sup> Unemployment had risen to record levels and social spending fell in absolute terms (although not as a percentage of the government budget), while local services were maintained and extended only on a “full cost recovery” basis, drastically raising prices and resulting in thousands of electricity, water and telephone cut-offs every month.

Perhaps the movement with the most organizing success and mainstream acceptance was the Treatment Action Committee (TAC), which fought for government-provided and subsidized AIDS drugs and for a reduction in drug prices on the part of pharmaceutical manufacturers.<sup>34</sup> South Africa faces a growing AIDS threat, with overall HIV/AIDS infection rates at one in nine – five million people. TAC worked with the government in a lengthy and ultimately successful legal battle against international pharmaceutical companies over AIDS patents and the importation of generics.<sup>35</sup> But this proved in certain ways easier than what came next – the struggle to convince the government to financially and institutionally support an anti-retroviral program in the face of the President’s own controversial views on AIDS and general Parliamentary concerns about the budgetary implications of doing so. TAC mounted a second court case against the government, spearheaded a public education campaign and held numerous protests. Unlike some movements, TAC was able to mobilize at the local, national and international level and to establish a partnership with COSATU. Although TAC has worked effectively with the state at times, it took an oppositional stance at others and was vilified by government leaders when it did. As von Lieres comments, TAC’s community organizing had little to do with reinforcing the state’s legitimacy:

Rather than arenas for citizen participation *with* and *within* the state, these new forms of participation are spaces in which marginalized people act *without* and *on* the state. As participatory spaces that are more often chosen than offered, they can become sites of radical possibility in overcoming political exclusion.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly claiming spaces for citizen participation, but without the same level of mainstream acceptance, were the new neighbourhood movements. These mirrored the politics of the ‘civics’ in the townships during the 1980s as a ‘cross-class coalition of collective consumers’ organizing around local material issues, but without broader political objective of overthrowing apartheid

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<sup>33</sup> Hein Marais, *South Africa: Limits to Change*, second edition (London: Zed, 2001): p. 193.

<sup>34</sup> Bettina von Lieres, “Citizenship, Marginalisation and New Forms of Participation in Post-apartheid South Africa,” paper presented at *Ten Years of Democracy in Southern Africa*, Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada, May 3-5, 2004. For basic information on TAC’s AIDS campaigning, also see [www.tac.org.za](http://www.tac.org.za).

<sup>35</sup> Strictly speaking, the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association chose to withdraw their suit in the face of intense negative publicity spearheaded by TAC. Von Lieres, “Citizenship, Marginalization and New Forms of Participation,” p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Von Lieres, “Citizenship, Marginalization and New Forms of Participation,” p. 2.

that had unified the earlier civics.<sup>37</sup> Most of the original civics had become closely aligned with the ANC during the 1990s, bureaucratized (especially through their national umbrella, the South African National Civics Organization or SANCO), and in some cases deeply politically compromised. So local protest came in the form of new community associations, although some individuals who had been involved in earlier anti-apartheid community struggles participated. Ashwin Desai has written about the rejuvenation of community struggles that began in Chatsworth, Durban, in 1999 and extended to other major cities in the months that followed.<sup>38</sup> Local residents struggled against evictions and municipal service cut-offs that felt every bit as devastating as those initiated by the apartheid government, but had to face the additional obstacle of fighting against the ANC. Desai comments:

It was in these contradictory circumstances – with a government elected by the oppressed majority and using that power to carry out the program of big capital – that people began defending their homes from the private security companies hired to effect the state’s eviction notices. ... They were discussing strategy, learning to say “Phansi ANC! Phansi!” (Down with the ANC! Down!) and planning meetings, strikes and marches. Rivulets of humanity were back on the streets demanding land, a basic income grant, anti-AIDs medication, a halt to privatization and dignity.<sup>39</sup>

New protest movements in South Africa all claim social rights against the state and globalized corporate capital, but nonetheless have been highly fragmented in terms of geographic location and, more importantly, institutional relationships. These movements, and many others besides, are organized around single issues or based small geographic communities. Desai notes that the fragmentation of these various struggles raises serious questions about the extent to which they can form the core of a movement (as opposed to movements) for change in South Africa. He argues:

These struggles, at first conducted in isolation from each other, have begun to jump the firebreaks of race and place. Will they continue to do so, and incinerate the fetters of old political allegiances and class compromise that have so immobilized these last ten years? Or will the multitude be confined to the outer reaches of society doused by brigades of politicians, past masters of turning on and off the taps of struggle and expectation? Or will they stand side-by-side and in so doing light the way to a new society?<sup>40</sup>

The difficulties of establishing a politics of counter-hegemony should not be underestimated. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, counter-hegemonic practices were everywhere – and nowhere – in the activities of South Africa’s social movements and even some of the unions. As William Carroll argues, counter-hegemony (in the neo-Gramscian sense) means constructing “an alternative hegemony that unites various subaltern groups into a counterhegemonic bloc of oppositional forces committed to an alternative social vision.”<sup>41</sup> The central problem in recent

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<sup>37</sup> Daryl Glaser, “South Africa and the Limits of Civil Society,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 23.1 (March 1997): p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Ashwin Desai, *We are the Poors* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> Desai, *We are the Poors*, p. 11,

<sup>40</sup> Desai, *We are the Poors*, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> William K Carroll, “Social Movements and Counterhegemony: Canadian Contexts and Social Theories,” *Organizing Dissent*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. William K Coleman (Toronto: Garamond, 1997): p. 25.

social movement practice has been the inability to move from counter-hegemonies to counter-hegemony – a unifying strategy capable of withstanding liberal capitalism’s capacity to disorganize and demobilize alternative visions. It is extremely difficult to imagine a counter-hegemonic program that would exclude COSATU because of its institutional network, relatively broad mandate and historical legitimacy as an agent of struggle and change in South African society. But although some of the new protest movements have worked effectively with organized labour, notably neighbourhood associations with the South African Municipal Workers’ Union, (SAMWU) and the Treatment Action Committee (TAC) with COSATU on HIV/AIDs, for the most part structural links to the labour movement are weak and tenuous. Buhlungu observes that “Although the unions still retain some capability to pull off major mass protests, ... they are increasingly becoming isolated from other grass-roots movements.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Ashwin Desai has gone so far as to argue that “the big trade unions are part of the bulwark that is preventing autonomous and radical resistance developing against the ANC and its neoliberal policies.”<sup>43</sup> This marked a significant shift from the 1980s, when trade unions, especially those affiliated with COSATU, and community organizations were closely linked.

Despite the growing willingness of COSATU to protest against the ANC’s policies, Desai’s conclusion about the current political role of organized seems warranted in light of COSATU’s unwillingness to stand up to the ANC. The federation has continued to assert its commitment to the Alliance and has retained its hope to be able to steer the ANC in a different direction. COSATU has repeatedly argued that it must remain in the Alliance to ensure that the ANC retained its progressive tendencies and kept workers’ interests at heart.<sup>44</sup> The flip side of this seemingly forlorn hope is the fear that the only alternative to inclusion in the Alliance is abandoning the ANC to the right wing in exchange for a quick march to the “political wilderness.” Although one could equally argue that COSATU is already in the “political wilderness” since it has been quieted and marginalized so effectively by its inclusion in the ANC Alliance, the sense that COSATU is better off in than out seems to have heightened under the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki,<sup>45</sup> in large part because of the success of the ANC leadership in managing its relationship with COSATU.

COSATU’s focus on shifting ANC politics by participating in intra-Alliance policy structures (and before that, in shaping the emerging economic program at NEDLAC) also implies a politics concentrated in the interventions of leaders rather than in developing the capacities of the membership. Saul has argued that any counter-hegemonic strategy for ‘structural reform,’ requires an accountable leadership through a democratic practice of consultation and direct participation so that ‘the movement’ is grounded in working class society (broadly conceived) which itself remains somewhat autonomous of the leadership.<sup>46</sup> COSATU’s traditions should have provided a strong base to develop that politics: most COSATU members subscribed to participatory democratic principles that included regular election of representatives, direct mandating on all issues that affected the membership, regular report-backs and the possibility of

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<sup>42</sup> Behlungu, “From ‘Madiba Magic’ to ‘Mbeki Logic,’” p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> Desai, *We are the Poors*: p. 100.

<sup>44</sup> McKinley, “COSATU and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994,” p. 13.

<sup>45</sup> See Behlungu, “From ‘Madiba Magic’ to ‘Mbeki Logic.’”

<sup>46</sup> Saul, *Recolonization and Resistance*, pp. 143 - 167.

recall.<sup>47</sup> Large, worker-controlled meetings and congresses were important mechanisms for ensuring mass participation, and critical to a worker-driven process. Throughout the past fifteen years, however, there were indications that mandating structures in COSATU were breaking down, undermining the practice of trade union democracy. Both workers and experienced shop steward leaders felt that decision-making in COSATU was becoming ever more concentrated in the hands of a few leaders and national officials. Mobilization became more difficult, both because of the abstract nature of many of the issues and because the very structures that would underpin an effective worker mobilization campaign had become atrophied.<sup>48</sup> This has profound implications for the possibility of a counter-hegemonic project as well.

In light of the refusal to even countenance less than wholehearted support for the ANC, despite profound disagreement over policies, program and operating style, COSATU's limited protests have actually served to strengthen the legitimacy of ANC rule. By continually reinforcing the perception that there is no alternative to strongly and virtually unconditionally supporting the ANC no matter what the latter does, COSATU is effectively conceding that only the ANC could develop an economic restructuring program that takes the needs of the majority of South Africans into account. In its ongoing search to be truly accepted as part of South Africa's post-apartheid hegemonic bloc, COSATU's actions have served to mystify the real objectives and implications of the new government's programs instead of disorganizing consent and disrupting discourses and practices of domination. Its continual reaffirmation that there is no progressive political alternative to the ANC has stymied efforts to create independent ways of thinking and acting and organizational bases for advancing alternatives.<sup>49</sup> By offering only 'protest politics,' COSATU has disorganized potential bases for counter-hegemonic participation and decision-making that might have challenged the legitimacy of the ANC government's program, rather than simply some of its policies.

## Conclusion

Prospective counter-hegemonies face opposition at the national and international level from state, inter-state and private sector actors and their beneficiaries who actively seek to disorganize efforts to create a counter-hegemonic vision.<sup>50</sup> As we have seen, the ANC has been extremely successful in disorganizing opposition to its economic restructuring program. Although South Africa's trade union movement toyed with counter-hegemonic strategy, by 1994, if not earlier, they turned decisively towards seeking inclusion in the emerging post-apartheid hegemonic bloc. In addition to relying on their political linkage with the ruling ANC, they sought a common transformative political program, which became the *RDP*, and pressed for a tripartite economic and labour policy body, organized along corporatist lines, to work with the new government to gain consent for the new program from the private business sector. But the strategy faltered early and became even less viable after mid-1996 for one simple reason: the new government excluded the working class in general, and organized labour specifically, from the emerging hegemonic bloc and instead sought to ground their new national restructuring program in the needs of a multi-racial private sector business class. Sakhela Buhlungu has summed it up succinctly: "the

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<sup>47</sup> David Ginsberg, Eddie Webster et al, *Taking Democracy Seriously*, (Durban: Indicator Press, 1995) pp. 43 - 44.

<sup>48</sup> Dot Keet, "Shop Stewards and Worker Control," *South African Labour Bulletin* 16.5 (1992): p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Carroll, "Social Movements and Counterhegemony," *Organizing Dissent*, p. 25.

<sup>50</sup> Carroll, "Social Movements and Counterhegemony," pp. 26-29.

Mbeki era is about building and consolidating powerful social forces that will finally cohere into a ruling bloc in a democratic South Africa. The unions and the broader working class movement will not form part of it.”<sup>51</sup>

This emerging basis for the post-apartheid South African state has been very much contested, however, by those excluded from the emerging hegemonic bloc, and indeed, it would appear that ANC hegemony has not (yet) been fully realized due to its narrow social base. Although the April 2004 elections showed that the ANC’s political control is assured, its broader program has not yet garnered popular legitimacy. Unless the post-apartheid government wants to move to a far more repressive political regime, this contestation can be expected to continue, for, as former trade unionist and current Trade and Industry minister Alec Erwin remarked with great prescience in late 1989: “a future economy where mass poverty exists side by side with minority wealth ... cannot be democratic and must collapse into renewed oppression and bitter conflict.”<sup>52</sup>

To date, trade union and other civil society protests have not threatened the stability of the state, but rather, has manifested itself in struggles within the ANC over the direction of the economic restructuring program and the process for determining that program. Until recently, the government defended its neo-liberal program with growing stridence, but there have been signs that the emergent bourgeois historic bloc may be finally consolidating itself on a basis of hegemony rather than dominance by incorporating more of the demands of the poor and working class. Three discrete events point in that direction. The first was the Growth and Development Summit, held at NEDLAC in June 2003 to discuss economic policy priorities. There, the government shifted its economic program, not away from the neo-liberal GEAR but by adding on a significant public works job creation initiative that would begin to address one of the most pressing demands of both organized labour and community organizations.<sup>53</sup> Second, a ten-year policy review was released by the government in November 2003 that outlined the way forward for the ANC government in its third term of office (2004-2009). Although not repudiating GEAR, it again highlighted employment creation as one of the most significant policy challenges and proposed strategies that foresaw the direct involvement of the state.<sup>54</sup> Finally, the November 2003 budget was more expansionary, with a more ‘developmental’ orientation, than those in the country’s recent past. It is not yet clear, however, whether this shift in policy direction was simply for electoral purposes or is indicative of a new direction that might permit the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony in South Africa.

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<sup>51</sup> Behlungu, “From ‘Madiba Magic’ to ‘Mbeki Logic,’” p. 179.

<sup>52</sup> Erwin, “South Africa’s Post-Apartheid Economy,” p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> NEDLAC, “Growth and Development Summit Agreement,” June 7 2003, <[www.nedlac.org.za](http://www.nedlac.org.za)>.

<sup>54</sup> Government of South Africa, *Towards a Ten Year Policy Review*, November 2003.