

The **New South Africa** *and the* **Process** *of* **Transformation**

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I arrived in South Africa twenty days after the second democratic national election and six days following the inauguration of the African National Congress (ANC)-led government of Thabo Mbeki. There were three things that I immediately noticed: the beauty of the land, the continued impact of colonialism and apartheid, and the pervasiveness of crime.

I actually had expected the first two, but there was nothing that could have prepared me for the ever-present existence of crime—guarded and gated communities with walls around them topped by barbed wire; in some of the more upscale neighborhoods, electrified fences; warnings to me by my hosts that I needed to be *very* careful in walking around, even in daylight.

In the streets of Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, there are individuals who wear orange vests who “guard” parked cars. I asked about this and was told that it was a step by the government to give jobs and responsibility to those who in the past often robbed cars. When one parks or when one

leaves a parking space, one gives a tip to the “guard.”

In Johannesburg, all shops close promptly at 5 P.M. and everyone leaves for the day. There appear to be no after-work parties or evening shopping sales.

Many white South Africans cannot stop talking about crime and about what they see as the deteriorating conditions since the end of apartheid. In fact, in the last election, the slogan of the so-called Democratic Party (which appears to have become the major opposition party to the ANC and is a white party) was “Fight back!” a slogan normally advanced by the left, but in the South African context takes on an entirely different meaning. Many of those white South Africans who have chosen to emigrate cite crime as symptomatic of the deterioration of conditions.

Yet what is missed by this are the underlying conditions. Cunningham Ngcukana, general secretary of the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU, the smallest of the three trade union federations and the one that emerged largely out of the Black Conscious-

ness and Africanist movements) stated to me forthrightly, "When the government talks about having a summit on crime, I'm not interested. I am interested in any discussion on job creation!"

Ngcukana's statement is not a rhetorical ploy. South Africa has an unemployment rate estimated at 30 to 37 percent. This dwarfs the level of unemployment during the Great Depression in the United States, which was around 25 percent. The crime problem in South Africa is directly related to economic conditions and the complete distortion of economic relations, which are holdovers from years of colonial rule and apartheid.

Riding along the shore in Cape Town, one sees a very different South Africa. Perhaps one of the most beautiful geographical locations on Earth, the area is dotted with wealthy estates and communities virtually secluded from the realities of the day-to-day existence of the black majority. The distribution of wealth in South Africa is very evidently among the worst on this planet, and one needs only contrast such idyllic communities with those one sees on the road to the Cape Town International Airport, where latrines back onto creeks and shanty towns seem to grow out of the ground like marsh foliage. This contrast illustrates the fundamental challenge facing the progressive forces in South Africa: Can what they reference as the national democratic revolution be completed, or is this a revolution stalled?

One Part of the Mass Movement

What came to be known as the independent black trade union movement, which arose in South Africa during the 1980s, played a major role in the bringing down of apartheid. This movement expressed the different ideological currents arising from the South African liberation movement. Two of the three current federations—the Congress of

South African Trade Unions (COSATU, the largest of the three federations) and NACTU—represent a direct line from earlier formations that emerged in the 1980s. Although both formations advance a "non-racial/antiracist" approach, COSATU soon after its formation in 1985 chose to align itself with the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP). NACTU, on the other hand, although associated with the Pan-Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) and the Azanian Peoples Organization (AZAPO), chose to remain nonaligned while advancing a set of politics that was essentially derived from the Black Consciousness and Africanist movements. The third federation, the Federation of Unions of South Africa (FEDUSA), is approximately 60 percent white and tends to be more conservative in its politics than the other two federations.

COSATU and NACTU, by their own admission, played a dual role in the anti-apartheid struggle. They organized a burgeoning trade union movement to fight for workers' rights, but they additionally played a key role in the political struggle against the apartheid system. A high degree of political education and discussion took place within the ranks of both federations, and they consciously saw themselves as part of the mass movement to oppose the racist system.

With the end of apartheid and the assumption of power by Nelson Mandela and the ANC, the role of the trade union movement began to change, first in subtle and then in more dramatic ways. COSATU faced an immediate challenge in 1994 when many of its top leaders and staff were chosen to run—under the banner of the ANC—for elected office. This was soon supplemented by those who left the union movement to work in government or business (e.g., the onetime National Union of Mineworkers' leader Cyril Ramaphosa, who is now a prominent businessman). This drain put immediate pressure

on COSATU to bring forward new leaders. Although this may have, in some respects, been inevitable, it nevertheless forced a changing of the guard at precisely the moment when veteran strategists were needed to address the newly emerging conditions of the post-apartheid era.

NACTU faced other challenges. During the anti-apartheid struggle, and particularly during the tail end of the Cold War, U.S.-influenced and -directed forces attempted to utilize NACTU and its predecessor organizations against COSATU (and its predecessors) because of the developing relationship that COSATU had with the ANC and the SACP. There were immense ironies here, given that the NACTU tendency contained within it anti-imperialist and revolutionary Marxist forces, albeit not aligned with the SACP. In any case, the tension created between these forces was exacerbated by the activities of many U.S. trade unionists of the AFL-CIO, then led by the arch-Cold Warrior Lane Kirkland. The residue of this relationship carries through to this day.

The COSATU/NACTU differences, although remaining, have receded in their most dramatic aspects. Particularly since the Mandela win in 1994, the significance and influence of the Black Consciousness and Africanist forces have declined dramatically. In the 1999 election, the PAC performed terribly, seeming to be on the verge of oblivion. This trend was discernable in 1994 and forced some rethinking within the NACTU ranks.

1999: Exhilaration and Concern

Despite the fact of Nelson Mandela's heroic status during his tenure as South Africa's president, struggle began to unfold within the popular movement over the direction of politics and economics. The issue, on the surface, was that of economic development. The Al-

liance (ANC, COSATU, and SACP) had advanced a platform for economic development known as the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). This was a comprehensive attempt to overhaul South Africa and transform it from its apartheid days. There is considerable argument as to whether the RDP was ever fully implemented, because during the Mandela presidency another approach was advanced by the government, which earned the wrath of the popular movements—the Growth, Equity and Reconstruction (GEAR) program, which emphasizes private investment, and specifically privatization.

The struggle around GEAR represented the continuation of a battle that began in the early 1990s within the ANC: the battle between “TINA” and “THEMBA.” “TINA”—“There is no alternative” (as articulated notoriously by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher)—was the view of those forces that sought an accommodation with neoliberal global capital. In essence, the view held that there is no viable alternative to cutting the best deal with global capital, particularly in light of the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the evolution of capitalist relations in China. “THEMBA”—“There must be an alternative”—was the view of those forces that were attempting to rearticulate an anticapitalist/prosocialist vision for the future of South Africa.

The TINA/THEMBA battle has seen itself unfold in several countries following national liberation. The battle in South Africa was situated in the context of an incomplete national democratic revolution, the term used by the Alliance to describe the period of the anti-apartheid/anti-imperialist struggle. Political power was largely won by the popular democratic forces led by the ANC, yet economic power remained largely in the hands of white, apartheid-era capitalists. Even those capitalists who recognized that apartheid must come

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to an end were not necessarily prepared to accept the verdict of a fully enforced national democratic revolution.

There were many nuances to the struggle around GEAR, but fundamentally the issue came down to whether the ANC-led government would play a major role in the economic development of the country and redressing the gross injustices that remain or, in the alternative, whether the development of the country would largely be left to the private sector.

Added to this battle was the strengthening role of global capital. In many respects, apartheid-era South African capitalism had shielded itself from the global market. Ironically, with the end of apartheid, the ANC-led government in many respects opened up South Africa, thus challenging the domestic producers who had to face international competition. Many of the same features of global capitalism we are witnessing in the United States became evident in South Africa—plant closings, runaway shops, contingent workforce, growth in capital-intensive production—at precisely the moment when the new South Africa desperately needed job creation and a redistribution of the wealth.

Thus, in the months leading up to the June 1999 election, there were hot debates in the popular democratic movements surrounding the question of what stand to take vis-à-vis the ANC. Forces, within both COSATU and SACP, not to mention in nonaligned organizations, questioned the continued viability of an alliance. This question was the source of important debates. As just one example, at the SACP's congress in June 1998 the delegates were treated to harsh words from both Mandela and Mbeki, who questioned the stand taken by some SACP members and leaders in opposition to the ANC-led government's policies.

Nevertheless, both the COSATU and the SACP decided to uphold the Alliance and

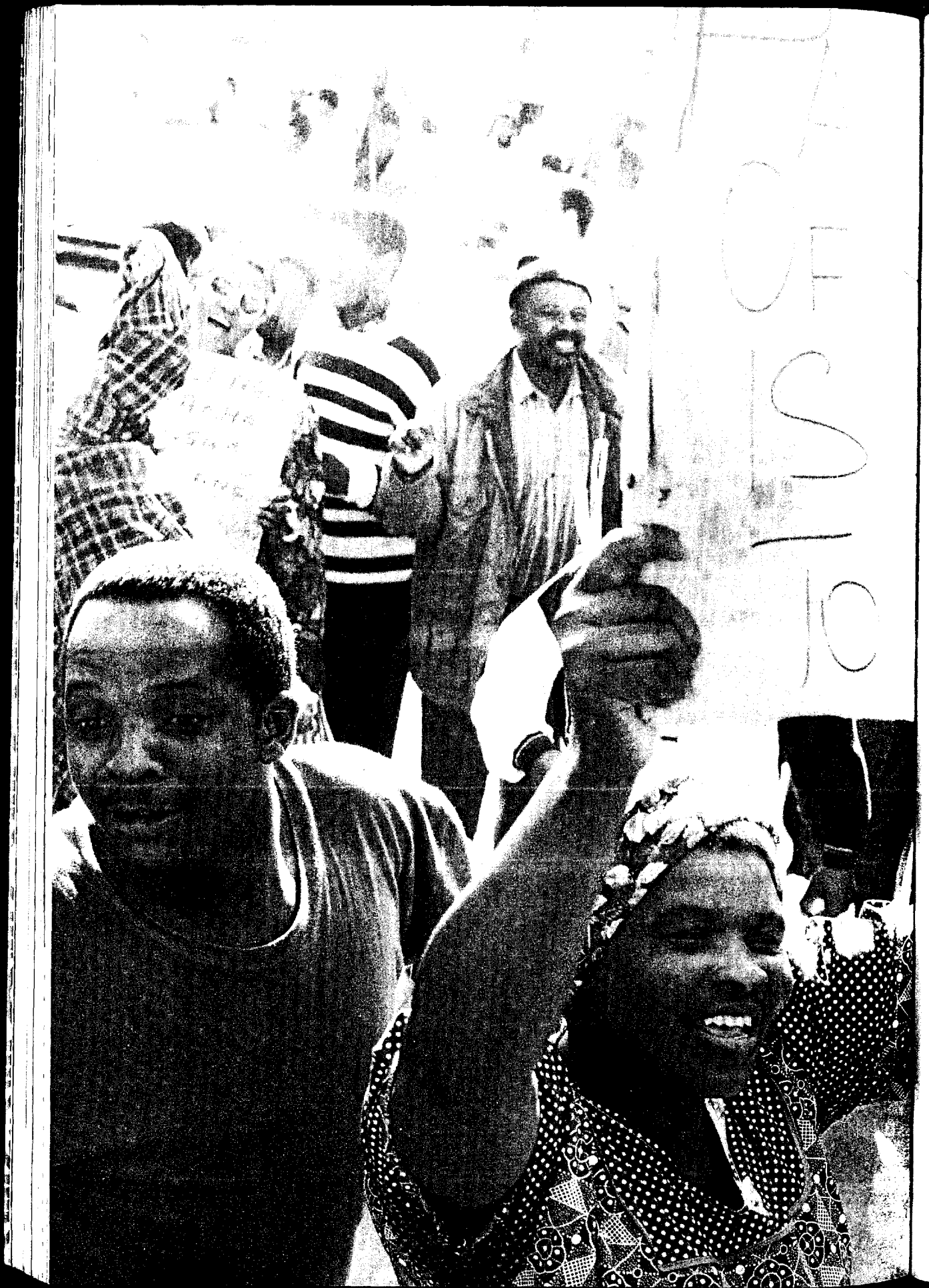
throw everything into the election. The level of mobilization conducted by these forces and the ANC led to a dramatic victory in June.

Two-thirds of the parliament is either ANC or aligned with the ANC. Important provincial posts have been retained or captured by the ANC. And not insignificant, the ANC has retained its alliance with former foe Chief Buthelezi, leader of the KwaZulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party.

Despite the elation resulting from the election victory, the popular democratic forces remain on edge. COSATU and NACTU activists have been looking for a clear sign from the government that it is committed to a pro-people economic development approach, rather than one favoring the free market. In Mbeki's opening address to parliament, he seemed to signal a commitment to stand firm against neoliberal capital when he spoke out against those who attack the South African labor relations system as too rigid (by which is meant that the system is allegedly too proworker) and needs greater flexibility. Mbeki challenged these critics, saying instead that the system was sufficiently flexible, and then went on to address job creation. This address was well received by the COSATU leadership, although it was obvious that concern remains within the ranks.

The Question of the Framework

June 30–July 2, 1999, the coastal city of Durban witnessed the twelfth annual Labour Law Conference, a gathering bringing together trade unionists, labor lawyers, and academics to review current questions in the arena of labor/management relations. The 1999 theme was "Regulated Flexibility: Labour law, the South African Labour Market, and the Global Economy." Many of the tensions of post-apartheid era South Africa emerged in this gathering.



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Although trade unionists constituted a significant percentage of the delegates, they were far from a majority, a fact that led to a decision to hold a preconference workshop directed specifically at trade unionists. In this preconference workshop, the issue of labor market flexibility was hotly debated as well as the impact of global capitalism on the new South Africa.

It might be useful to step back for one moment and clarify terms. This issue of "labor market flexibility" actually refers to the ability of capital to restructure the workforce and work process to advance its own interests. The nice-sounding term "flexibility" hides the real intent: the ability of capital to rid itself of government regulations and union restrictions to increase profits. The voices of business regularly announce that restrictions on their ability to restructure the workforce hurt their profits and, ipso facto, hurt the national economy. These voices in recent years have risen in volume in South Africa, and murmurings were heard in the Labour Law Conference as well.

In the preconference workshops, trade unionists debated the implications of global capitalism for South Africa's development. They closely examined the question of whether post-apartheid labor law changes have actually benefited or impeded the advance of the working class. They also began looking at the implications of all of this for working-class organization and power.

The actual conference was a bit more formal, albeit with very well attended and organized workshops. Nevertheless, many trade unionists began to express reservations about what they perceived to be the dominant tone of the conference: the implicit need for greater levels of workplace flexibility and the onus being on the trade unions to build and strengthen a partnership with the government and business.

The context of this debate is quite different from that in the United States.

The ANC-led government took steps to engage popular involvement in various levels of decisionmaking. One key arena was the economy, where the government established the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), a tripartite body of representatives from labor (all three federations), business, and government. The notion of tripartite involvement, practiced in many social democratic-run or -influenced countries in Europe, is largely unknown in the United States for a variety of historical reasons. Nevertheless, in South Africa, a legitimate role has been established for the union movement beyond (or in addition to) the basic issues of workplace wages, hours, and working conditions. The underlying question in the conference was the extent to which the three components of NEDLAC—business, labor, and government—were equally committed to the notion of a "social partnership."

An indirect debate ensued at the conference, held as often in the conference's halls between sessions as during the full sessions, over the nature of South Africa's future and the terms and conditions under which a social partnership could be put into place. Two experiences stood in dramatic contrast, presented separately at the conference. The Republic of Ireland, which since the late 1980s has witnessed a dramatic turn of economic events, in part influenced by an arrangement between the union movement, government, and business, was presented as a positive example from which South Africa should learn and that it should implicitly follow. Later that same day, a presentation was offered regarding the situation in the United States, where workers have witnessed a rather one-sided class war against them by business, and where, with relatively little power, there has

Union Strike. Photo by Kristen Clarke.

been no interest by capital in anything approaching a social partnership.

What was particularly striking about the contrast in experiences was the reaction of the participants. Many of the labor lawyers and academics were thrilled with the presentation of the Irish experience and appeared to be convinced that this was a viable route for the South African movement. Trade unionists from all three federations expressed varying degrees of discomfort about the Irish experience and were not sure that it had much in the way of applicability to the South African situation. By contrast, the presentation of the U.S. experience resonated for the trade unionists, who saw real parallels in the actions and intentions of South African capital. Many of the lawyers and academics were irritated by the presentation of the U.S. experience, seeing it as unnecessarily provocative.

It is also worth noting that many of the trade unionists who came to the conference expressed no opinion because they had to leave early. In Durban, the blacks continue to live, for the most part, outside of the city. Their absence from the discussion was a reflection of how much and how little has changed in the past several years since the toppling of the apartheid regime.

The tension witnessed in the conference was symptomatic of the larger tension in the popular democratic movement. It is not a simple counterposing of positions. In a situation where there has been an incomplete national democratic revolution and where capitalism is very much alive and well, what steps does a progressive-led movement take to advance a popular democratic model of development? What connection is there between structural reforms that are advanced in the interests of the popular democratic movement and an end to capitalism? These questions confront the popular democratic movement, and they are the subject of almost constant debate in the trade union movement.

Transformation and the "S" Word

The leaderships of both COSATU and NACTU have, broadly speaking, advanced the need for a socialist future for South Africa. By "socialist," they generally mean a radical expansion of democracy and popular control, where the working class leads the economy and the economy responds to and addresses the needs of its people. For some, socialism is clearly no more than rhetoric; for others, it is clearly their life's blood.

Nevertheless, for the movement the question of the connection between the current situation and the socialist future remains a bit unclear. The movement, and particularly the labor movement is, quite understandably, focused on the immediate needs of the people, most especially job creation. One of the most important debates revolves around whether the South African economy, as currently structured, will produce more jobs (on its own) or, on the contrary, whether additional steps will need to be taken to address this. One aspect to this is whether economic development in South Africa must stress an export-driven approach to advance South Africa's world competitiveness.

One must say that at the moment all the votes have not been counted toward resolving this debate. Until the recent Asian economic crisis, the export-driven model for economic development appeared to be a viable direction within the framework of capitalism, irrespective of the downside to the Asian experiences. With the Asian crisis, a number of questions have begun to emerge, including whether national economic development necessitates a greater level of concern about the expansion and responsiveness to the domestic market, rather than going all out for exports. There is also some concern that the entire notion of what has come to be known as "progressive competitiveness," that is, whether a progressive-led approach

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to developing the economic competitiveness of the national industries is a workable direction given global overcapacity in so many sectors and the bases upon which most competitiveness models are situated—lower labor costs.

Perhaps one of the most exciting features to the current debate is over a regional approach to economic development. Within the leadership of COSATU, there seems to be a growing realization that South Africa's economic future cannot realistically be separated from that of other southern African states. Thus, the question of focusing on domestic needs takes on a new and actually broader definition. Domestic may mean South Africa *and* the other southern African states.

Two significant problems remain, even if/when this debate is resolved. One concerns the matter of jobs; the other concerns wealth redistribution. A recent study commissioned by COSATU and conducted by its research arm (NALEDI—National Labour & Economic Development Institute) determined that the major manufacturers in South Africa have no plans for greater levels of job creation. Specifically, these manufacturers are planning on greater use of capital-intensive production (i.e., greater levels of labor-saving technology). Thus, the South African government, and the labor movement, even with a resolution of economic development direction(s) cannot rely on the private sector to produce the number and type of jobs necessary to address the depression-level unemployment problems.

Within COSATU, this problem has led to discussions of alternative economic strategies. This discussion is far from over, but it includes thought as to the use of industrial cooperatives and greater levels of government investment in public sector work, what can probably be described as a neo-Keynesian or structural Keynesian approach to the economic picture.

The other problem haunting the country is the wealth polarization. South Africa is a very wealthy country, but the wealth levels are so distorted as to make a mockery of democracy. To complete the national democratic revolution that the ANC set out to achieve, wealth redistribution will have to take place. This is no easy task since rather than being an economic question, it is actually more of a political problem. The incomplete national democratic revolution and the end of apartheid were the results of popular mobilizations, armed struggle, and ultimately negotiations. To deprive the super-rich of the booty that they accumulated over the course of the colonial and apartheid era, a renewed popular mobilization and pressure will be necessary.

This point cannot be exaggerated, since any steps to wealth redistribution will be fought vehemently, not only by domestic right-wing forces but also by global capital, which would see such steps as taking South Africa away from an economic course on which the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank would look favorably.

In some respects, the issue of wealth redistribution and job creation are related to a third matter under debate in South Africa: affirmative action. It is hard to believe that with the stark polarization that exists that there could be any debate on the need for affirmative action in South Africa. Nevertheless, there is such a debate and opposition from whites as well as some so-called coloureds who believe that such steps, taken to redress years of oppression, are unfair.

What all three issues have in common is that they relate to a reinterpretation of the question of "democracy." In the period since the mid-1980s and through the end of the Cold War to today, the notion of democracy has been reinterpreted by global capital very narrowly. Whether one was looking at the Philippines, Haiti, Eastern Europe, or South

Africa, the spokespersons for global capital have defined democracy as the existence of elections and formal representative government.

What is both interesting and challenging in the South African experience is that the popular democratic forces, particularly those in the labor movement, are struggling to rearticulate democracy in a much broader manner, a manner that they believe is consistent with developing a road to socialism. That is, democratic rule cannot exist with 37 percent unemployment; it cannot exist with vast polarizations of wealth; it cannot exist with a dismantled apartheid, yet clear workforce stratification. Democracy, or people's power, must exist through a dramatic restructuring of society to meet the needs of its majority. This is what the prosocialist, popular democratic forces appear to believe to be the actual conditions that will lay the basis for a successful, and indeed, revolutionary transformation of South African society.

By Way of Conclusion

The level of popular mobilization in South Africa remains astounding, yet it is not something that can be sustained. Every movement goes through periods of ebbs and flows. Believing that one can sustain high levels of popular mobilization is a recipe for problems, because there remains a pull on the masses "back" to their regular lives.

The South African trade union movement is attempting to come to grips with this problem as it grapples with the need to keep the pressure on the ANC-led government. It is obvious to the trade unionists that there is pressure from South Africa's right wing and from global capital to bend the ANC-led gov-

ernment to its wishes. The trade unionists are attempting to grapple with how to continue to truly represent workers (and not solely their current membership) while at the same time collaborating with the ANC in advancing its agenda, an agenda that flows out of a hard-fought national liberation struggle.

All of this brought to mind a story I heard on National Public Radio (NPR) in the United States concerning a very different part of the globe. When the progressive Mexican political leader Cuauhtémoc Cardenas was elected mayor of Mexico City, NPR interviewed progressive and left-wing activists from Mexico City about the victory and about their involvement in the campaign. Prior to the Cardenas mayoral campaign, many of these groups and individuals had never taken part in electoral politics, but in this case they decided to become active. NPR asked them whether they were going to now demobilize. Their response was instructive. They stated that they could not afford to demobilize, because they knew that the right-wing would be mobilizing to pressure Cardenas to back away from his campaign pledges and that if they (progressives) did not offer a countervailing pressure, there was no question in their minds but that Cardenas would falter, regardless of his best intentions.

The future for true South African democracy rests in the hands of the popular democratic forces such as the trade union movement. The extent to which they keep the pressure on the government and remember that there is a fundamental difference between access and power when it comes to politics will be the extent to which South Africa completes or aborts its efforts at a great transformation.