**In, out and round-about: the variegated terrain of labour responses to the C-19 pandemic in South Africa**

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| In the overall context of this historic crisis, will survivalism and the more immediate meeting of basic material needs ensure that the working class remains, even in ever more differentiated and increasingly dispersed and functional forms, the key cog in a remade capitalist machine or, can the collective consciousness of the working class be shifted in order to underpin a new, revolutionary, anti-systemic politics and practice? |

**Some introductory, contextual remarks**

Long before the Covid 19 (C-19) pandemic arrived in South Africa, the country’s broad working class was already in serious trouble. Whether permanent, casual or unemployed or whether part of trade unions, worker collectives or wholly unorganised, the worker ship had long been navigating treacherous waters.

Much of this journey has been framed by the cumulative, devastating impacts of 25 years of neoliberal onslaught; created, managed and implemented by the post-1994 power triumvirate of the state, capital and party (ANC). Further, the more immediate (post-NASREC) period under Ramaphosa has seen intensified attacks on unions, rising levels of casualisation and thus worker precarity as well as a more generalised increases in poverty and inequality amongst the working class majority.

As 2020 got underway with ever-louder rumblings of a global economic recession and while C-19 was beginning to wreak havoc in Asia and Europe, the Ramaphosa government and its big corporate allies acted as if it was ‘business as usual’. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the February budget, which saw an even more pronounced application of neoliberal austerity ‘medicine’ for the working class; for example, more deregulation, more corporate welfare, graduated but serious cuts to social spending and public sector worker salaries and, moves towards up-scaling the corporatisation and privatisation of public assets and services.

Once the virus began to take practical hold in South Africa there was no sign that the state-capital-party matrix of power had any intention of significantly deviating from its path. No doubt, the political and economic bosses were smelling blood in the air. Indeed, soon after the government had declared its initial ‘State of Disaster’ and instituted the first phase of lockdown, Treasury Minister Tito Mboweni unambiguously laid down the (neoliberal-speak) ‘line’ when he located the crisis as an important opportunity for government to reiterate ”our commitment to implement structural economic reforms ...”[[1]](#footnote-2)

The pandemic arrived on a terrain where not only was the broad working class seriously fractured but also beset by weak organisation and a serious lack of any overall/guiding ideological and political frame of class struggle. It is within this historical past and more immediate context that we must locate and analyse labour responses to C-19 pandemic.

**Phase 1**

Much like everyone else in South Africa, labour was clearly unprepared for what was on its way. Even as the pandemic was spreading rapidly outside the African continent, the initial responses from unions were confined to brief public statements about the need for more information and awareness as well as the expanded provision of personal protective equipment (PPE).[[2]](#footnote-3)

It was only smaller, self-organised worker collectives such as the Gauteng Community HealthCare Workers Forum (GCHWF) who went beyond this by adopting a more explicitly political and social framing of their response. They called on government to focus efforts on local organisation and community-led solutions as well as for a “dramatic increase in community health workers (permanently) employed”.[[3]](#footnote-4) Independent worker support/ service outfits, like the Gauteng-based Casual Workers Advice Office (CWAO) and its associated worker collective (the Simunye Workers Forum) quickly mobilised, distributing hundreds of thousands of C-19 information pamphlets in townships and settlements across the East Rand.

Together with the GCHWF those organisations also have become part of a Gauteng-based and specifically-named ‘C-19 Working Class Campaign. Additional members include the General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA) and the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO). In its platform, the Campaign prioritises “working class solidarity and … grassroots organising” which it says, has the potential to “break the stranglehold of the ruling monopoly capitalist class over the state and over society … and force the state to take the necessary radical steps”.[[4]](#footnote-5)

On the broader civil society front, a sizeable number of organisations coalesced around a ‘C-19 People’s Coalition’, which has sought to hold government “to account and commit to a broad, bottom-up, public effort … (with) full support … to working-class and poor communities”.[[5]](#footnote-6) However, labour sector involvement in the Coalition has been limited to one provincial union, the Western Cape-based Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU), the Democratic and Municipal Allied Workers Union (DEMAWUSA) as well as the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU); the latter leaving it up to its affiliate member unions to become more practically involved.

In an early indication that its own response will be moulded by its historical embrace of the confining frame of corporatist politics, COSATU called for “a NEDLAC meeting at the level of EXCO to discuss the role each constituency … has to play…”[[6]](#footnote-7) No surprise then that soon thereafter, COSATU felt the need to publically reassure its largest affiliate NEHAWU, of its support for a planned strike against government for reneging on the last leg of a three-year public sector wage agreement.[[7]](#footnote-8) In the event, the strike was quickly called off, with COSATU and NEHAWU ‘retreating’ into the more comfortable space of the Public Service Co-ordinating Bargaining Council, where talks remain ongoing.[[8]](#footnote-9)

**Phase 2**

After President Ramaphosa announced the imposition of a 21-day lockdown on 23rd March, none of the main trade union federations other than COSATU immediately responded. Consistent with its largely ‘in-house’, mutual back-scratching relationship with the state and the governing ANC, COSATU’s response was to “welcome(d) this intervention by the President” [including the economic measures], but called for a more comprehensive stimulus package.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The collective ‘silence’ from the labour sector arguably represented a combination of a generalised endorsement of the need for a lockdown alongside a ‘wait-and-see’ attitude on the social and economic fronts. One response from a civil society organisation however, explicitly pointed out that the limited support measures announced did not speak at all to those workers informally employed, including the estimated 160 000 sex workers and 80 000 community healthcare workers.[[10]](#footnote-11)

One of the government measures announced was the ‘Temporary Employee/Employer Relief Scheme (TERS), in which funds from the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) are to be used to temporarily cover (for up to 3 months) salaries for those workers who can no longer work due to the closure of the employer. Not surprisingly, while the scheme did not elicit much public comment at all from larger, established unions with permanent worker membership, there was plenty from those representing and/or working with, precarious workers.

This is best exemplified by a letter from the CWAO to the President and Minister of Employment and Labour highlighting the plight of workers who have been laid off or cannot work due to the ‘no work, no pay’ principle and/or those whose employers have not filed for the benefit. The letter noted that there is no compulsion on employers to file for the benefit and the relief scheme is only available where employers have registered with UIF; the result being that millions of workers are thus left without any income/support.[[11]](#footnote-12) This state of affairs has since been confirmed by a National Employers Association of South Africa (which represents around 10 000 small and medium-sized businesses) survey which shows that only 47% of employers that applied for the UIF/TER relief received funds and even then, often only partial payments.[[12]](#footnote-13)

Indeed, one need only look at the situation of domestic workers to confirm the degree of impact. A survey of hundreds of domestic workers conducted by Izwi Domestic Worker Alliance during April showed that “79% were not registered for UIF and 11% did not know whether they were registered or not”. Accordingly, the small, independent South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and the United Domestic Workers of South Africa (UDWOSA) “have proposed an amnesty for all employers who have not registered their employees and have not contributed to the fund”.[[13]](#footnote-14)

As the lockdown and its associated impacts on many workers began to bite even deeper it was the smaller, independent labour organisations that provided more strident and incisive responses. Both GIWUSA and CWAO threatened legal action against government; the former to amend the UIF-TERS relief scheme and the latter to enforce the Occupational Health and Safety Act due to repeated employer breaches.[[14]](#footnote-15) Further, these two outfits issued a report on ‘Workers and the Coronavirus in South Africa’ in which they took up the issue of the closure of the CCMA and the Department of Labour’s Labour Centres and highlighted many examples of worker responses through struggles at companies such as Mister Sweet, Ferrero, Dis-Chem, Nampak and Tiger Brands.[[15]](#footnote-16)

Other examples include the Gauteng Community Healthcare Workers Forum taking up the issue of a lack of PPE[[16]](#footnote-17) as well as DEMAWUSA doing the same for EMS workers in Ekurhuleni Metro[[17]](#footnote-18) (both with partial success). And then there was the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) and the South African Waste Pickers Association (SAWPA) launching of a legal challenge to have their activities recognised as an essential service. While that case was lost, it led to better working relations with government and a few weeks later, to reclaimers being allowed to go back to work.[[18]](#footnote-19)

**Phase 3**

Once the government announced the extension of the lockdown, followed by the economic stimulus package, the main union federations started to speak out more vocally. SAFTU national office issued two, fairly quick-fire but somewhat contradictory statements. The first indicated support “for the intended objectives of the lock down” while being mildly critical of government short-comings and abuses by capital.[[19]](#footnote-20) The second however, described things as “economic chaos … with severe police repression, utter incompetence by a government incapable of supporting its poor and working people [and] illusory benefits … where these will be hijacked by the country’s corporate sharks and political elites”; it ended with a wide ranging list of both immediate and longer-term (structural) demands[[20]](#footnote-21)

For its part, COSATU was (mostly) trying to take credit for the unveiling of the economic stimulus package. Just two days before that unveiling, COSATU publically announced that it had agreed to a R1trillion package in NEDLAC.[[21]](#footnote-22) After Ramaphosa announced the R500billion package COSATU pretty much welcomed everything while simply asking for better implementation.[[22]](#footnote-23) Meanwhile FEDUSA finally came out of the closet. In what can only be called a tepid response at best, it issued a statement whose main calls were for “all South Africans to … [take] ownership and responsibility’ and for “this rainbow nation … to demonstrate its tenacity by showing the true meaning of a new social compact, to avoid this very existential threat of our beloved South Africa”.[[23]](#footnote-24)

Two of the unions that over the last decade or so have been considered by many to be the most ‘radical’ (although that is highly debatable) - the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) - also came out of the shadows and issued public statements. For NUMSA it was a May Day message from General-Secretary Irvin Jim who, besides largely repeating what its federation had previously said about the travails of workers under the pandemic, provided a lengthy critique of capitalist macro-exploitation.[[24]](#footnote-25)

In some ways, the C-19 pandemic and its differentiated impact on sectors of the working class is surfaced in NUMSA and its response. That is, the majority of its membership is drawn from more skilled, better-paid, permanent workers employed in larger private sector industries and as such, those members have not been as badly affected. Jim confirms this when he points out that, “the coronavirus pandemic has shown us that it is the lowest-paid workers … who are actually driving the battle …”[[25]](#footnote-26)

Somewhat similarly, if differentially applied, AMCU’s response has been decidedly singular, with a focus on the implementation of health and safety standards for mineworkers. After being ignored by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE), AMCU approached the Labour Court and succeeded in getting an order for the adoption of a national Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), binding on all mines.[[26]](#footnote-27)

Over the last 2-3 weeks the actions and engagements across the labour sector have, much like those amongst the broader public, predominately revolved around the extent of and impacts from, a gradual lifting of the lockdown. So for example, the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and other smaller teachers unions have been having a back-and-forth with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) over the readiness of schools to reopen, with an understandable focus on the health and safety of teachers.[[27]](#footnote-28) While COSATU has kept to its ‘we welcome … but please improve’ approach[[28]](#footnote-29), SAFTU called Ramaphosa’s latest address a ‘non-announcement’ and complained about being ignored by government.[[29]](#footnote-30)

And, if anyone was wondering whether NACTU still existed or not, they would have been pleased to see the recent remarks attributed to its General-Secretary Narius Moloto. Clearly eager to finally be heard, Moloto called for the lockdown to be lifted immediately, labelling it as “diabolical” and “the greatest threat to our freedoms since the birth of democracy”.[[30]](#footnote-31)

**A few concluding observations and questions**

If there is a core, double-sided ‘take-away’ from this summary view of labour responses to the pandemic, it is this: On the one side is the majority of the working class and those small but active collection of organisations that represent and support them, who are simply trying to survive while attempting to carve out spaces for limited but very real practical solidarity and impact’; On the other side (with a few exceptions) is an ever-shrinking but still sometimes powerful section of unionised, permanent workers that are taken mainly with protecting what they have and who thus, by default, remain key to keeping the system mostly ‘stabilised’, pandemic or no pandemic.

In light of the above there are at least three key questions that can be posed (but certainly not answered here):

1. Can the crisis that has been triggered and increasingly exacerbated by this pandemic open up the possibilities of a different kind of political, ideological and organisational restructuring of the working class?
2. If the crisis goes on for a long time and the government is unable to cope with the socio-economic situation and the material position of the majority of the population, will the main unions dig in further or ‘break free’ from the corporatist social and political compacts and engage in intensifying class war?
3. In the overall context of this historic crisis, will survivalism and the more immediate meeting of basic material needs ensure that the working class remains, even in ever more differentiated and increasingly dispersed and functional forms, the key cog in a remade capitalist machine or, can the collective consciousness of the working class be shifted in order to underpin a new, revolutionary, anti-systemic politics and practice?

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