

## **The Congress of South African Trade Unions and the Tripartite Alliance since 1994**

**Dale T. McKinley**

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With the African National Congress's (ANC) victory in the April 1994 elections, the advent of formal political democracy in South Africa was paralleled by the formal, political institutionalisation of the Alliance. From this point on, the ANC's Alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP), were no longer simply the other two-thirds of the Alliance as a liberation movement, but part of a governing coalition whose allegiance would be to the political party form of the ANC as government.

For COSATU, the largest, most militant and best organised section of the South African working class (and with a socialist programme to guide it), this had required a somewhat grudging acceptance of the strategic centrality of an elite-led and managed process of negotiation, led by the ANC, as the 'revolutionary' means to access political power. The logic of such a compromise involved the 'delivery' of a measure of political power and democracy while accepting the limitations of the 'objective conditions' under which the process was pursued. In other words, COSATU was telling workers to be patient - once political power had been accessed through the capturing of the state, the Alliance would then be able to deal with the 'real' problems associated with ownership of the means of production, redistribution of wealth, the meeting of basic material and social needs and worker rights.

In the course of the political negotiations from 1990-1993 one of COSATU's more militant affiliates, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), had introduced a resolution at the 1993 COSATU Congress arguing for the discontinuation of the Alliance after the 1994 elections. The resolution, which pointed to the need for an independent worker's party to represent the interests of the South African working class within a post-apartheid political democracy, was never formally adopted by COSATU. Nevertheless, the argument that COSATU

should break from the Alliance once the ANC had accessed state power continued to have a (minority) currency within COSATU ranks throughout the negotiations period.

To give programmatic expression to these and the many other 'problems' inherited by apartheid capitalism, COSATU initiated the drawing up of the *Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)*. Its six basic principles (an integrated and sustainable programme; a people-driven process; peace and security for all; nation-building; linking of reconstruction and development; and democratisation of South Africa) were expansive enough to include the most basic aspirations of the organised working class and to have a broader, multi-class appeal. After numerous workshops within COSATU and meetings between Alliance leaders and activists, 'independent experts', and international solidarity groups (producing at least four different drafts, in each of which the 'radical' content was successively watered down), the *RDP* emerged publicly in early 1994.

It was hailed by the Alliance leadership as the new 'people's programme' which provided, 'an integrated, coherent and viable socio-economic policy framework (that) seeks to mobilise all our people and our country's resources towards the final eradication of apartheid and the building of a democratic, non-racial and non-sexist future' (ANC, 1994, p.1). The *RDP* rapidly achieved the status of an electoral manifesto with which the ANC, alongside COSATU and the SACP, subsequently rode to victory in April 1994.

The hundreds of thousands of COSATU members, and millions more in the broader working class whose votes propelled the Alliance from liberation movement to governing coalition, voted for the *RDP*. The Alliance was to be the organisational expression of the 'people's will' and the *RDP*, the programmatic equivalent. Indeed, the leadership of all three components of the Alliance had successfully 'sold' the *RDP* as the natural inheritor of the core 'programme' that had for so long shaped liberation politics in South Africa and had provided the organisational guide for the very establishment of the Alliance – *The Freedom Charter*. The promises of the Alliance as the 'people's government' were now the promises of the *RDP* as the 'people's programme'.

### **Into an organisational and strategic *cul-de-sac***

Until the adoption of the *RDP*, the programmatic basis for COSATU's membership in the Alliance had been *The Freedom Charter*, a document broad and vague enough to appeal to virtually all anti-apartheid

class forces in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> This had been strategically underpinned by the general acceptance of the SACP's two-stage theory of the South African revolution. The pursuit of a 'national democratic revolution' (NDR), led by the ANC, was to be the primary strategic mission until such time as the 'objective conditions' rendered the pursuit of a second stage of socialism possible.

By tethering itself to the Charterist/NDR camp, COSATU had placed a large part of the working class and their concomitant struggle for socialism within a contradictory strategic and organisational framework. On the one hand, COSATU committed itself to prioritising a multi-class approach to national liberation in which the 'people' would now be constitutive of all social classes divided along racial lines. Within the bounds of the NDR then, national liberation was effectively separated from social liberation, political democratisation from socio-economic democratisation. On the other hand, COSATU had to subsume a particular ideological party line, with *The Freedom Charter* representing the specific programmatic reflection of a political organisation, the ANC, seeking to govern the country. The conscious fusion of this party programme with an all-inclusive national 'will' provided the ANC with the basis to claim a national mandate, not necessarily subject to the scrutiny and democratic processes associated with the principles of working-class formations such as COSATU (McKinley, 1997a, p.21).

When *The Freedom Charter* was effectively replaced by the *RDP*, none of these fundamental organisational and strategic contradictions disappeared. Indeed, with the capturing of a negotiated political power by the Alliance these contradictions were institutionalised. COSATU placed itself, and the socialist aspirations of a large part of the organised working class in South Africa, within a corporatist strategic framework that relied on the political and economic institutionalisation of the *RDP*'s 'radical' textual possibilities.<sup>2</sup> By embracing the *RDP* as the programmatic expression of working-class struggle through the Alliance - i.e., the vehicle through which the organised working class could strategically intervene in socio-economic policy formulation and 'delivery' of basic material needs - COSATU acceded to a corporatist process that would necessarily have to rely heavily on cooperation from a nationalist-dominated ANC party/government now in political power and an international and domestic capital with its hands firmly on the levers of economic power.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extended critical analysis of the character of *The Freedom Charter* see, McKinley (1997), pp. 20-23.

<sup>2</sup> This approach was not without its harsh critics within COSATU and the broader South African left. See for example two papers written before the 1994 elections: Roger Etkind and Sue Harvey (1993), 'The Workers cease fire', *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 17, (5), pp. 84-87; and John Appolis and Susan Tilley (1993), 'Discussion article on the Reconstruction Accord' (unpublished paper). See also Keith Griffier (1994), 'Is the RDP a Workers' Programme' (unpublished paper); Workers' List Party (1994), 'The Red Paper on the RDP', (pamphlet); and Neville Alexander (1995), 'Class Struggle in the New South Africa', *Workers' Voice*, (4).

From this point on, the political and organisational character of the Alliance itself - umbilically attached as it was to the programmatic potential of the *RDP* - would be defined by the failure to come to grips with two issues central to any kind of working class political economy. The analysis of, and strategic insight into the materialist distinction between the 'modes' of capitalist production and distribution; and, working-class control and use of the state as a necessity for any 'reconstruction' of a political economy geared towards socialism. COSATU, heavily influenced as it was by its 'socialist' Alliance partner, the SACP, adopted a strategic approach to the post-apartheid 'transition' that was doubly contradictory:

- the strategic 'search' was under girded by a fundamental theoretical contradiction - i.e., seeking to reconcile the revolutionary social requirements of a working class political economy with the exploitative and competitive requirements of capitalist political economy;
- such a 'search' was grounded in an equally fundamental practical contradiction - i.e., attempting to deliver on socialist priorities through hegemonising the economic and social sphere of capitalist relations of distribution without the necessary existence of a political hegemony as expressed in working class control of the state (McKinley, 1997b, p.118).

As had so often been the case in the past, the SACP provided the analytical justifications for the pursuit of such a strategy and its influence within COSATU ensured that such arguments were, for the most part, taken uncritically on board<sup>3</sup>.

### **Reaping the bitter fruit**

As part of its contribution to the newly formed Alliance government, COSATU 'deployed' fifteen senior unionists (from both the federation and affiliate level) to take their place as ANC politicians and encouraged hundreds of other union officials and activists to join the ranks of the new government bureaucracy. At the same time, COSATU encouraged all of its members to join and help build both the ANC and the SACP. This was consistent with COSATU's strategic 'buy-in' – i.e., active participation by the organised working class in the 'people's government' and the

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<sup>3</sup> See for example: SACP (1994), 'Defending and deepening a clear left strategic perspective on the RDP', in *The African Communist*, (138), pp. 29-37; Blade Nzimande (1995), 'The Character of our Party: Building the SACP in the Present Period', in *The African Communist*, (139/140), pp. 17-23; and SACP (1995), *Strategic Perspectives*, Document from the 9th Congress, 6-8th April, Johannesburg.

'people's movement' (the Alliance) provided the best means to achieve the political and socio-economic transformation promised by the *RDP* as the programmatic embodiment of working class struggles.

It did not take long however, before the political realities and economic consequences of the acceptance of such a strategic 'buy-in' began to reveal themselves through some of the very individuals who had been 'deployed' by COSATU. Soon after the elections, then Deputy Minister of Finance and leading SACP member Alec Erwin (previously one of COSATU's foremost intellectuals) stated, without the slightest sense of irony, that economic growth as a 'basic tenet of the RDP' would be premised on job creation in the private sector, not on public sector-led works programmes. Such public sector works programmes had been one of the 'basic tenets' of the RDP that COSATU had pushed so hard to include in the 'people's programme' (*Business Day*, 5<sup>th</sup> September 1994). Similarly, then RDP Minister and former COSATU General Secretary Jay Naidoo, in mid-1995 told a gathering of the corporatist body set up to find 'consensus' between the state, labour and capital – the National Economic Development & Labour Council (NEDLAC) - that South Africa needed R129 billion over ten years to deliver the 'basics' of the *RDP*. Naidoo stated - 'there is no way the government can provide even the basic services. That is why we have to help local government structures to access capital from the markets at favourable rates' (*The Sowetan*, 16<sup>th</sup> August 1995).

Despite such early warning signs of the marginalisation of the *RDP* (something that was recognised by others on the left<sup>4</sup>) and a rightward shift by Alliance members now in positions of political power, COSATU continued to play its role as a loyal Alliance member. For example, most of COSATU's organisational energy during 1995 went into the successful provincial/local government elections campaign of the ANC/Alliance – a campaign, once again, propagated and fought with the *RDP* as the election manifesto.

It did not seem to bother the COSATU leadership that during the 18 months since the ANC/Alliance government had come to power, there had not been a single strategic meeting of the Alliance leadership at any level. Neither did the COSATU leadership appear concerned that all functions of the Alliance had effectively revolved around bolstering the political positions and standing of the ANC, with scant attention paid to the ongoing programmatic content behind such political consolidation. Besides the (limited) victories accruing to the organised working class –

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<sup>4</sup> See Ben Fine (1994), p. 30.

achieved as a result of COSATU's participation in the negotiations leading to the adoption of the South African *Constitution* and the Labour Relations Act (LRA) - its membership in the Alliance had not translated into the kind of political influence that would have been expected from a body with nearly two million organised worker members. It was only years later, in 2000, that the COSATU leadership belatedly began to acknowledge the complete lack of any meaningful political and strategic functioning of the Alliance<sup>5</sup> but by then, as we will see, it was a classic case of too little, too late.

The year 1996 proved to be a watershed for both COSATU and the Alliance. At the beginning of the year, the ANC-dominated Cabinet of Government Ministers, which by now had several former COSATU and SACP leaders in its ranks, unilaterally announced the shutting down of the RDP Ministry that had ostensibly been set up to coordinate and implement the base programme of the Alliance. After the 1994 elections, it had been no coincidence that the COSATU leadership had virtually forced the issue of having an RDP Ministry and had insisted strongly that 'one of their own' (in the form of ex-COSATU General Secretary, Naidoo) take the reins. Now, partly as a result of the dysfunctionality of the very Alliance that COSATU had willingly thrown its political and organisational weight behind as the means through which to influence and shape the new democratic state, its one institutional foothold had been allowed to slip away.

No sooner had COSATU members begun to recoil from this body blow, accompanied by muted grumbling about the closure and misgivings about the proposed balkanisation of the *RDP* between various Ministries, than the ANC/Alliance leadership in government, through the Department of Finance, quickly followed by unveiling a *National Growth and Development Strategy (NGDS)*. In a direct assault on the basic 'developmental' foundation of the *RDP* (i.e., that economic growth and social equity could only be achieved through a systematic redistribution of socio-economic resources), the *NGDS* explicitly stated that growth would now be the number one priority of socio-economic policy, which will 'contribute to development.' The *NGDS* promised that by following such a growth path, South Africa would usher in a 'New Deal' in which 'all' would benefit and 'all' would have to sacrifice (Department of Finance, 1996a).

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<sup>5</sup> See COSATU (2000), 'Advancing Social Transformation in the Era of Globalisation', Political Discussion Paper for 7<sup>th</sup> Congress (September).

COSATU now had to face-up to a situation in which its membership in the Alliance had effectively been exposed as the working class Emperor with no clothes. Having championed the Alliance as the organisational means to co-governance (not to mention more direct political influence over socio-economic policy) for the organised working class, the COSATU leadership was left having to explain to workers why and how it now appeared as though such membership made little difference. But before the ensuing debate and recriminations could even get off the ground, the same ANC/Alliance leadership within the state trumped the *NGDS* with the unveiling of a new macro-economic policy framework, the 'Growth, Employment and Redistribution (*GEAR*) programme.

If the *NGDS* had pointed in the direction of moving away from any potentially radical redistributive framework as set out in the *RDP*, *GEAR* served to confirm the embrace of a capitalist neo-liberalism. *GEAR* forthrightly committed the state, and by implication all members of the Alliance within it, to implement a strictly monetarist, liberalising and trickle-down growth framework in which the adoption of market-oriented policies would yield the desired outcomes of significant job creation, investment, growth, reduced poverty and general inequality (Department of Finance, 1996b)<sup>6</sup>.

The Central Committee of the SACP, which contained several COSATU leaders, 'welcomed' *GEAR* and indicated that the SACP fully backed the objectives of this ... strategy' (SACP Central Committee, June 1996). The response of the COSATU leadership was to produce a lengthy document entitled *Social Equity & Job Creation (SEJC)* after a series of internal discussions amongst its affiliates. *SEJC* reiterated the centrality of the *RDP* as the political programme of COSATU and the Alliance. In direct response to the neo-liberal economism of *GEAR*, the *SEJC* proposed six pillars 'to promote social equity' and 'give concrete expression to the central pillars of reconstruction in the RDP': a programme of job creation; a redistributive fiscal policy; proposals to break up economic concentration; measures to promote worker rights; a plan to build industrial democracy; and, steps to promote equity and economic development globally. The document called on 'our people, on organised workers, on the unemployed and on the democratic government to take steps to have this programme implemented now' (COSATU, 1996a, pp.1-10).

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<sup>6</sup> For good overviews of the political economy of *GEAR* see Hein Marais (1998), *South Africa: Limits to Change*, Zed Press & University of Cape Town Press, London & Cape Town; and, Patrick Bond (2000), *Elite Transition*, Pluto Press & University of Natal Press, London & Pietermaritzburg.

The political and organisational sterility of the Alliance was further affirmed. Less than two years after capturing political power on a publicly endorsed common programme, the contradictions inherent in the Alliance could no longer be contained under the guise of either a shared strategic vision or the multi-class umbrella of an ANC as 'liberation movement'. Within the ranks of the Alliance, grassroots members engaged in heated debates about *GEAR*, something the leadership of all three partners unsuccessfully attempted to curtail.<sup>7</sup> This soon spread to parliament, where reports began to emerge of a 'climate of fear', where 'you don't stick your neck out for fear of getting your head chopped off' (Davis, 1996). As had been the case during the political negotiations in the early 1990s though, the COSATU and ANC leaderships set about 'managing' such debates and opposition from within the ranks by releasing organisational discussion documents. In the process, they provided themselves with added political and ideological control over fundamental strategic debates concerning the Alliance and the class interests of its component parts. It was not long before the two heavyweights of the Alliance (COSATU and the ANC) traded discussion document blows.

The ANC leadership followed *GEAR* with its *State and Social Transformation* document. Here, 'the struggle for social and economic transformation' was reduced to the 'task of replacing the Apartheid state with a democratic one...a task which continues to define the nature and character of the ANC, the Liberation Alliance as well as the broad democratic movement' (ANC, 1996, p.1). Responding to COSATU's appeals to return to the *RDP* principles that underpinned social equity and job creation, the ANC accused its Alliance partner of attempting to 'secure their sectional economic 'victories' at all costs (leading to)...the potential political defeat of the popular forces and the destruction of the economic base which is necessary for the sustained improvement in the conditions of life of the ordinary working people' (ANC, 1996, p.17). However, the capitalists received much kinder treatment, with the ANC informing 'private capital that the democratic state offers the best possible environment for the realisation of the interests of capital', wherein, 'the creation of improved material conditions cannot be achieved nor sustained without the working class's readiness and freedom to sell its labour power' (ANC, 1996, p.15). The ANC rounded off its polemic by waving an ideological white flag: 'economic globalisation ... imposes a certain surrender of a nation state's control over many areas (including) currency

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<sup>7</sup> The author was personally involved in these debates within the ranks of the SACP and COSATU. See: Dale T. McKinley, Langa Zita and Vishwas Satgar (SACP National Political Education Secretariat), 'Critique of Government's Macroeconomic Strategy: Growth, Employment and Redistribution' (June 1996).



and fiscal policies, environmental control and the effect of the new international division of production and labour ...' (ANC, 1996, p.24).

The COSATU leadership followed with another document, *An Alliance Programme for Socio-Economic Transformation*. In it they acknowledged, for the first time, that 'there is a general demobilisation of our people... most activists are no longer sure what the strategic objectives are ... there is very little participation and involvement in decision and policy making ... *the Alliance itself has no programme*' [my emphasis] (COSATU, 1997, p.3). Admitting that 'Alliance structures have only been brought in, if at all, on an *ad hoc* basis, or for crisis management', the COSATU leadership pleaded with the ANC to honour its pledges as political head of the Alliance - 'the ruling party, as with ruling parties throughout the world, is expected to use its electoral mandate to ensure the implementation of its programme' (COSATU, 1997, p.5). And yet, despite the recognition that the Alliance had effectively ceased to function politically, and knowing full well that the *RDP* had already been dumped in the programmatic rubbish bin, the COSATU leadership continued to argue that, 'the *RDP* should remain the programme of the Alliance. What confronts us now is the need for a strategy for its implementation' (COSATU, 1997, p.18). They proposed that:

... the Alliance enter into a National Agreement on a programme to implement the *RDP* in strategic areas with specifics on legislation, mass involvement, mechanisms, financing and time frames ... that this Agreement be combined with a programme of national mass mobilisation for transformation ... that the broad MDM forces need to be involved in the development and implementation of the programme (and) that the ANC, as majority party, needs to align all processes of governance towards achievement of this programme. The same should apply to other Alliance partners (COSATU, 1997, p.20).

In other words, COSATU's leadership was telling workers that the forging of a tactical 'implementation' programme (for the Alliance) in an organisational context of a non-functioning Alliance, on top of a strategic political programme (the *RDP*) that no longer existed except in the realm of rhetorical declarations, was the best means to advance their class interests. Workers could have been forgiven for being somewhat confused. After all, they had been told again and again by the COSATU leadership that the strategic basis for the Alliance was a 'common programme' and that it was such a 'common programme' that would render the Alliance the vehicle for securing the political influence of the organised working class. Now that both of these fundamental foundations had, at the very least, been severely compromised, there was every reason for workers to ask serious questions about the strategic efficacy of the Alliance.

Unfortunately for workers though, blind faith had triumphed over objective reasoning. Even the COSATU leadership's much-hyped, 'September Commission Report', released soon after its *Alliance Programme* document, failed to come to grips with the implications of the ANC's strategic embrace of a 'deracialised' capitalist political economy and the consequent role of the Alliance in ensuring the political (tactical) acceptance of such. While acknowledging that, 'if the Alliance fails to define a common programme ... then COSATU will have to consider the possibility of leaving the Alliance', the September Report contradictorily argued that, 'COSATU should support the ANC when it adopts progressive policies ... seek to influence ANC policies wherever possible (and) respond with bold and outspoken opposition where the ANC adopts socially disastrous, conservative or anti-worker policies' (COSATU, 1996b, p.15).

The COSATU leadership had come full circle. Rather than face up to the realities of an Alliance that had clearly outlived what usefulness it did have in the early years of the South African 'transition', it was simply re-cycling a failed strategy. By doing so, the COSATU leadership 'allowed' itself little more than to engage in more semantic manoeuvring and political management, thus placing the struggle for the material and social interests of the South African working class in the hands of an Alliance that had now become the 'new' home of a South African political corporatism.

### **The Alliance as a tool of political corporatism**

As the fourth year of post-apartheid Alliance 'governance' got under way, its political influence quotient for COSATU had been a great deal lower than what might have been expected for a body representing the organised core of political support for its leading political party formation, the ANC. Even prior to the complete abandonment of the *RDP* and the unilateral implementation of *GEAR*, the main policy 'successes' that could be partially attributable to COSATU's influence through its Alliance membership came with a high price for South Africa's main workers' organisation, whose own programme was premised on the establishment of anti-capitalist economic and social relations. The first 'success', the adoption of a generally progressive *Constitution*, had come with an extremely high price - the institutionalisation of capitalist property relations - for a working class that had struggled over decades to change the fundamental character of productive relations. While the second 'success', the Labour Relations Act, provided a floor of worker rights, it failed to affirm one of COSATU's most fundamental demands - mandatory centralised bargaining.

These 'outcomes' were consistent with the ANC's own drift, since the early 1990s, towards embracing a corporatist strategic approach as the basis for engaging domestic capital and the various political forces of the apartheid-era. Necessarily then, this had required the ANC to push for COSATU's integration into a parallel corporatist strategy, through NEDLAC, that bound the dominant working-class organisation to an institutionalised process of class compromise with the state and capital.<sup>8</sup> What was not as evidently clear though, was that in the process, the Alliance itself had rapidly moved onto the same corporatist terrain. The corporatist tripartite mix of state-capital-labour was now being mirrored in the Alliance mix of the ANC (incorporating the roles of both the state and broad-based 'liberation' political party), the SACP (as the so-called 'vanguard' political party of the working class, but in reality the ideological gatekeeper) and COSATU (as the main representative of the organised working class).

There was no better confirmation of the corporatist agenda than the first major post-1994 Alliance Summit that, not surprisingly, took place immediately after the 'war' of documents in late 1997. Not only was such a summit a means to 'talk things through', but more importantly, an event that could be tightly controlled by the selected Alliance leadership invited to attend. Here, the leadership could engage in various theoretical debates (the SACP being the most garrulous), stroke each other's egos and give long speeches about the need for greater Alliance unity (McKinley, 2001, pp.183-206). Indeed, the Summit Report reflected the resultant depoliticisation and dominance of sloganeering and rhetorical trickery that was to be repeated again and again in the following years:

(We have) reaffirmed the common commitment of the partners to the strategic perspective of a National Democratic Revolution. The alliance is not a short-term or tactical relationship, it is grounded in a shared strategic perspective, elaborated in many policy positions, not least the RDP ... We have to work with and against the profit-seeking logic of private capitalism. Failure to appreciate both the 'with' and the 'against' result in one-sided positions, which often result in intra-ANC and intra-alliance debates ... the key strategic question we need to clarify as an alliance concerns the primary thrust of our strategy to deal with our constitutional political opponents (Alliance Summit Report, 1997, pp.2-8).

The Alliance was now to represent the organisational expression of a strategic 'straddle' that was to be neither anti nor pro-capitalist and directed at dealing with politically weak 'constitutional opponents'. The political programme for the realisation of this strategy was not spelled out. Rather, the Alliance would

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<sup>8</sup> For the most expansive and energetic arguments in favor of such institutionalised class compromise for the South African working class see: Glenn Adler and Eddie Webster (1999), 'Toward a Class Compromise in South Africa's "Double Transition": Bargained Liberalisation and the Consolidation of Democracy', *Politics and Society*, vol. 27 (3).

adopt a 'platform on key strategic policy areas for transformation' and the *RDP* would 'remain the *perspective* of the alliance (which) needs to be *asserted* as the basis for our programmes of transformation' [my emphasis] (Alliance Summit Report, 1997, p.35).

It was now the job of the various leaderships, but more specifically that of COSATU and the SACP, to carry this political/strategic 'line' down to the rank and file. This required the leaderships to persuade workers in particular, that the organisational 'unity' of the Alliance, regardless of the fact that its ideological and strategic content now consisted of little more than 'perspectives' and 'assertions', was the primary goal of working-class struggle. It also meant consolidating the argument that COSATU, as a 'loyal and disciplined' member of the Alliance, should never consider breaking from the Alliance to form an independent workers' party, since to do so would be tantamount to aiding a counter-revolutionary thrust aimed at destroying the only meaningful organisational expression of working-class interests. The corporatist triangle of the Alliance was to be maintained at all costs. Its continued existence would ensure the political power and potential class positioning of its various leaderships while binding the most powerful political force in South Africa, the organised working class, to institutionalised, politically-based class compromise and electoral loyalty.

Such a joint COSATU-SACP leadership-oriented sales job dominated the all-important 6<sup>th</sup> Congress of COSATU that, not coincidentally, followed hard on the heels of the Alliance Summit. Unlike the previous two post-1990 Congresses, there were no resolutions from affiliates calling for COSATU to leave the Alliance, and no heated argument about the formation of an independent workers' party. Most unions backed the arguments of the COSATU Secretariat and ANC Chairperson, Jacob Zuma, that COSATU's continued involvement in the Alliance was key to ensuring that the ANC remained progressive and kept worker interests at heart. While NUMSA mounted vigorous, but ultimately futile, opposition to the 'deployment' of COSATU leaders into the ANC in government, on the grounds that it would weaken the independence of the labour movement, the Congress resolved to continue the practice, given that the 'ANC-COSATU-SACP Alliance remains the only vehicle capable of bringing about fundamental transformation for the country'. Mirroring the rhetorical stratagems of the Alliance Summit, the Congress further resolved to develop a 'common transformation programme for the Alliance', a programme that was to be realised through 'regular Alliance summits (and) the establishment of an Alliance political centre ... coordinated by the Alliance leadership' (McKinley, 1998, pp.99-100).

When something is repeated often, and loud enough, it always has the potential to take on the mantle of accepted 'reality'. Speaking to the press after the Congress, then General Secretary, Sam Shilowa, set the

tone for what was to become the accepted 'reality' of COSATU's 'line' on its relationship with the ANC in government and its membership in the Alliance. On the one hand, he accused un-named government ministers of 'treating the Alliance with contempt and of government policies being 'driven by technocrats, the bureaucracy and ministries, and on the other, he profusely praised the 'strength and relevance' of the Alliance (Mvoko, 1997). Similarly, the SACP Central Committee, which contained numerous COSATU leaders, continued to criticise *GEAR* whilst maintaining the position that the SACP's 'socialism' was 'consistent' with the 'common commitment' of all Alliance partners to an 'ongoing National Democratic Revolution'. *GEAR* and all other areas of, what were in reality, fundamental ideological and strategic chasms between the working class and the ANC (both in government and in the Alliance) were shrugged off as 'secondary differences' (SACP Central Committee, 1997, pp.1-2). At the ANC's own Congress at the end of 1997, the ANC leadership headed by newly elected President, Thabo Mbeki, successfully 'managed' any remaining internal voices of dissent. Echoing the (by now) common mantra in relation to the Alliance, all cadres were directed to 'build and strengthen the Alliance at all levels, through a co-ordinated political programme' (ANC, 1997).

If any further confirmation of the top-down, corporatist character of the Alliance and its associated political impotency for the working class was needed, it was provided during the course of 1998. The recently ensconced ANC leadership took the opportunity presented by the holding of the SACP's 10<sup>th</sup> Congress and the inaugural meeting of COSATU's recently formed Central Executive Committee (CEC), to launch a double-barrelled attack against any residual moves amongst the respective rank and file members to question the strategic and programmatic 'line' of the Alliance. The meetings were taking place with the all-important 1999 general elections around the corner, a currency under attack from global capitalism's latest round of displaced crisis, and with a restless domestic and international capital calling for a categorical commitment to *GEAR*. ANC leaders 'deployed' to COSATU's CEC issued veiled threats of serious trouble if COSATU did not stop the heavy criticisms of *GEAR* and public sector privatisation flowing from the ranks of its members (Mnyanda & Gumede, 1998). Two days later, a finger-wagging President Mandela told the SACP Congress delegates (many of whom were also COSATU leaders and members) that the robust criticism of *GEAR* emanating from the rank and file of the Alliance was 'not acceptable' (Statement of President Mandela, 1998). The implicit message was clear - open dissent and opposition within the Alliance would not be tolerated by the ANC leadership. Mandela was followed by Thabo Mbeki who, speaking in his capacity as ANC President, resorted to proclaiming that the Alliance was objectively sacrosanct:

The struggle for the genuine emancipation of the masses of our people is not over and will not be over for a long period of time ... *This objective*

*reality means that the basis does not exist for the partners in the Alliance ... fundamentally to redefine the relationship among themselves, including the way to handle their differences and contradictions. [my emphasis] (Statement of ANC President Mbeki, 1998)*

It did not take long for the commands to be internalised. The SACP leadership publicly stated that ‘we are more than ever committed to the Alliance and to transformation’ and that any differences could best be addressed ‘properly at the senior leadership level’ (Nkosi & Desai, 1998). The COSATU leadership remained quiet. When a senior provincial COSATU leader soon thereafter circulated a paper arguing for a break with the Alliance, and for the establishment of a workers’ party, he was quickly hauled in front of a disciplinary hearing and severely censured.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of 1998, the battle for the ‘heart and soul’ of the Alliance had turned out to be somewhat of a damp squib. The ANC/Alliance in government was now fully and irrevocably committed to pursuing a deracialised capitalism, the Alliance outside of the state was itself in a state of organisational and political dysfunction and COSATU was now treated as little more than another interest group. Any political influence that COSATU had managed to exert on the state had derived more from the occasional strike actions undertaken by its affiliates and from its participation in NEDLAC, a corporatist body that, somewhat pathetically, had ‘delivered’ more than the narrower political corporatism that characterised the Alliance.

### **The End-Game of Petit-Bourgeois Politics**

What had ultimately triumphed by the time the Alliance began to gear itself up for the only thing that it now seemed to derive organisational purpose from, another round of elections, was the petit-bourgeois, nationalist class politics of the Alliance leadership. Once the dominant preserve of the ANC leadership, such petit-bourgeois politics had now spread itself throughout the ranks of the Alliance leadership. Privileging the power of the dominant class of capitalists (whether ‘private’ or state bureaucratic) that frames their political and economic aspirations over the power of the broad mass, this brand of leader thus views the struggles of that broad mass as an *ad hoc* requirement to a more important, instrumentalist access to power.

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<sup>9</sup> See John Appolis (1998), ‘It is Time for a New Political Party’, unpublished mimeo. Appolis, a senior leader in the Chemical Workers’ Industrial Union remained in his position but was warned that any such other initiative would result in his being fired.

When combined with a macro-nationalism, the politics that emerges strategically institutionalises a fundamental contradiction – the attempt to reconcile the priorities of the broad mass with the priorities of capital. In turn, this approach leads to the subordination and manipulation of the most powerful force available to the petit-bourgeois nationalist – working-class organisation and politics. Potentially revolutionary mass struggles for socio-economic liberation are turned into little more than struggles for petit-bourgeois reformism (McKinley, 1997, pp.130-133). Against this backdrop then, the Alliance had been effectively turned into an organisational gatekeeper for working-class struggle and secondarily, presented the best means by which to advance the political and economic careers of successive Alliance leaders.

There could have been few better illustrations of the practical effect of this dual role on COSATU than its approach to the 1999 elections. With what appeared to be a bad case of ideological amnesia and a taste for the absurd, the COSATU leadership released an election pamphlet for workers in which it was claimed that the ANC (through its electoral manifesto) ‘strongly reasserts the RDP as the basis for government policy, and undertakes to elaborate a detailed programme with its allies ...’. It went further, telling workers that a vote for the ANC was a vote to ensure that many of the key struggles and demands of the working class since 1994 would be realised. These demands included: ‘specific measures to speed up delivery of affordable public housing, health, transport, social security and education’; transforming all levels of the public sector to make it ‘accountable’ and to ‘meet the objectives of service delivery’; measures to support ‘labour intensive investment; mass public works programmes and youth brigades; tax, procurement, and monetary policies to promote employment; regional industrial strategies, particularly for the poorer areas’; and, supporting ‘development of co-operatives and opportunities for self-employment’ (COSATU CEC, 1999). The SACP leadership, maintaining its role as the ideological magicians of the Alliance, proclaimed that the ANC was now ‘emphasising anti-neoliberal perspectives’ (SACP, 1999, p.1).

The more immediate reward for such (dishonest) loyalty came in the form of the ‘redeployment’ (in reality, co-option) of COSATU’s two most senior and visible leaders during the 1990s. COSATU’s former General Secretary, Sam Shilowa, became the ANC’s Premier of Gauteng province and former COSATU President, John Gomomo, a national ANC parliamentarian. Two of the SACP’s senior leaders, Jeremy Cronin and Charles Nqakula, also found their way into the corridors of government power. What made these moves all the more significant was that all of these ‘working class leaders’ had been at the forefront of much of the debate concerning the political and organisational character of the Alliance as well as opposition to *GEAR*.

The political and organisational veil of the Alliance that had so effectively covered the true face of the petit-bourgeois politics of its leadership for the past several years was slipping. The first post-election 'test' of whatever remained of the political usefulness of the Alliance for COSATU came quickly. After months of talks in which COSATU's public sector unions had been fighting to receive inflation-related wage increases, the Public Service Minister (and leading SACP official), Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, quoting Lenin, informed the workers that they were being 'infantile'.<sup>10</sup> The ANC government would not budge on the workers' demands. The deadlock presented a classic opportunity for the Alliance to act as a political locksmith, opening the door for a political resolution, between the ANC government and COSATU, to fundamental worker demands. However, there was no politically functioning Alliance, and the COSATU leadership knew it.

Faced with the reality of a completely dysfunctional Alliance, what better way to provide workers with another 'managed' opportunity to vent their frustrations, than for the COSATU leadership to stage another COSATU Congress. Yet, even at COSATU's Special Congress (August 1999), delegates found themselves on the receiving end of a patronising diatribe from ANC National Chairperson, 'Terror' Lekota. The ANC leader informed the workers that there was an 'art to managing contradictions' and that COSATU should not throw 'raw opinions' to the public since this would only cause 'confusion and anarchy (that might) ... derail the revolution' (Statement by ANC National Chairperson Lekota, 1999). All the Special Congress could muster in response was a series of resolutions decrying the lack of implementation of agreed-upon 'positions' with government, and within the Alliance, and further calls for the Alliance to influence and intervene with government (through more meetings) to follow agreements reached (COSATU Special Congress, 1999).<sup>11</sup> Soon after the Congress, the ANC government rejected the workers' (minimalist) wage demands. It then proceeded to unilaterally implement its own, poverty-inducing wage offer, a move that blatantly undermined COSATU's cornerstone principle of collective/centralised wage bargaining. The response of the leadership of the largest and most powerful worker organisation in the country, whose membership in the Alliance was supposed to be its greatest political asset, was to 'express the hope that government would reopen negotiations' (Louw, 1999).

Armed with such politically and organisationally meaningless pleas and Congress 'mandates', workers were defenceless in the face of accelerated moves by the ANC government to privatise public assets and

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<sup>10</sup> This occurred during an interview with Fraser-Moleketi on an SABC National Radio programme that took place in the midst of the wage talks.

<sup>11</sup> See Resolutions and Declarations from 'COSATU Special Congress' (August 1999) – these can all be found on COSATU's official website, <http://www.cosatu.org.za>



services as part of the continued implementation of *GEAR*. The ANC soon unveiled its neoliberal plan (euphemistically named IGOLI2002) to privatise and/or corporatise all major public entities and operations (e.g., water, gas, electricity) in the city of Johannesburg. The response of the COSATU leadership, with the exception of a more independent section of leadership within the South African Municipal Workers Union affiliate, responded by issuing statement after statement calling for talks within the Alliance to ‘resolve’ the issue of privatisation.

Sections of the SAMWU leadership, both in Johannesburg and nationally, organised their members in a series of demonstrations and mass marches to oppose IGOLI2002. However, besides rhetorical support, the leadership of COSATU did little to back these struggles. Inside the Alliance, it was the SACP leadership in particular who worked hard to convince COSATU that the best way of ‘dealing’ with privatisation was to let the national leadership of the Alliance thrash things out, thereby providing additional political space for the ANC to continue to move ahead with the practical measures to implement its privatisation plans.

In a predictable, conclusion to a year that had started with the COSATU leadership hailing the overwhelming electoral victory of the ANC as a victory for the working class and confirmation of the continued organisational relevance and political power of the Alliance, yet another Alliance Summit was held. While the ANC’s privatisation plans proceeded unabated and municipal workers marched in the streets asking what had happened to the Alliance and where the *RDP* had gone, the Alliance leadership issued Summit declarations of enhanced ‘unity’ and ‘commitment’ to the Alliance. The respective leaderships would now form a ‘political centre’ to better manage inter-Alliance relations, ‘defuse tension’ and ensure that all partners ‘can influence government policy’ (Grawitsky, 1999). The political farce of the Alliance could not have been more evident. COSATU had been reduced to relying on the politics of pretence and political beggary, the very *modus operandi* of the petit-bourgeois politics that now dominated in its leadership ranks.

### **From Independence to Subordination: Back to the Future?**

COSATU began the post-1994 period full of confidence that its membership in the Alliance would provide the organised working class with the political and organisational means to influence, fundamentally, the character of the newly captured state and the socio-economic policies it would implement. The expectation was that the special political positioning of the leading force of the working

class (COSATU) in the Alliance, would allow for a working class 'bias' in the historic fulfilment of the 'National Democratic Revolution', through the 'people's' government (headed by the ANC), and the 'people's' programme (represented by the *RDP*). Indeed, the notion of maintaining such a 'bias' (based on the assumption that there was one prior to 1994) has been used consistently as the rhetorical justification for COSATU's continued, post-1994, participation in the Alliance. Not surprisingly, the strongest advocate of this 'line' has been the leadership of the SACP given that the SACP has always seen itself as the 'vanguard' political party of the working class and thus best qualified to politically manage COSATU's presence in the Alliance.<sup>12</sup> The expectations of workers were high. COSATU was, by far, the largest and most organised working class force, its members had democratically forged a socialist-oriented programme in the cut and thrust of struggle and, after all, there was the political 'vanguard' party of the working class (the SACP) to provide theoretical and strategic guidance.

However, less than six years after the heady days of 1994, COSATU found itself in the political wilderness. The 'deployment' of hundreds of rank and file members and scores from the leadership ranks, as 'loyal and disciplined' members of the ANC, into various state structures had not delivered the expected political influence and working-class 'bias'. Instead, what had been 'delivered' was a hard lesson (yet to be learnt by a majority of COSATU members) in the necessity for political independence, and thus political accountability, of representatives of the working class. Reliance on the SACP (within the Alliance) to provide political and strategic direction to working-class struggle had not produced a dynamic core of effectively politicised worker-socialists. Rather, COSATU's close relationship with the SACP had reproduced a new generation of union leaders steeped in a neo-Stalinist political and organisational methodology that privileged a nebulous NDR over working-class struggle, in the process inculcating a petit-bourgeois politics that ended up confusing workers and often, politically paralysing the various struggles of those workers.

Even those 'successful' agreements that COSATU had entered into with the state and private sector, such as the LRA and the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), have been extremely difficult to enforce, especially when there is a lack of mandatory centralised bargaining and workplace forums are separated from collective bargaining structures in the workplace.<sup>13</sup> Many other worker-related basic demands (especially in the public sector) such as consistent inflation-related wage increases, putting a halt

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<sup>12</sup> See for example: SACP (1995), *Strategic Perspectives*, Document from the SACP 9<sup>th</sup> Congress (6-8<sup>th</sup> April).

<sup>13</sup> See Carolyn Basset and Marlea Clark (2000), 'South Africa: (Class Compromise) ... Class Struggle', *Southern Africa Review*, vol. 15 (2).

to the scaling down of medical/housing allowances and protecting the jobs of the lowest paid/skilled workers had been ignored.

More devastating to workers though, was that none of COSATU's major socio-economic and political demands had been implemented as government policy. These demands included (amongst others): the complete abolition of Value Added Tax; the socialisation of basic services such as water and electricity; the effective socialisation of the mining and financial sectors; the consolidation and expansion of parastatals to drive state-led infrastructural development and job creation; the 'freeing-up' of the billions in the government pension fund; a grassroots-based, participatory budget process; international support for social movements and other working-class struggles, particularly in the Southern Africa region; the cancellation of the apartheid debt; and, the real provision of free education and health care.

In any objective sense then, this litany of the failures of the Alliance to act as a meaningful political vehicle for COSATU and the working-class interests it shoulders should have seen COSATU leaders furiously engendering debates among workers around political alternatives. And yet, when the time came for the 7<sup>th</sup> COSATU Congress in September 2000, the main political discussion paper offered up by the leadership could only decry the ineffectiveness of the Alliance and recycle the same ineffective 'solutions'. The paper acknowledged that 'after 1996, the Alliance did not go much beyond broad statements on shared objectives, with limited influence on what actually happened in government', but then went on to lay the blame for this sad state of affairs on 'the failure of the Alliance to function properly'. It lamented the fact that COSATU's 'hopes' had been dashed by the failure of the Alliance to 'sit down and thrash out a programme for social transformation based on the RDP and the (1999) Election Manifesto', but simultaneously blamed the lack of any 'mechanism to ensure that government implements Alliance agreements' (COSATU, 2000a, pp.8-9).

It thus came as little surprise that most of the discussions at the Congress itself were infused with a similar petit-bourgeois mentality – i.e., stating the obvious, complaining about it and then offering a de-politicised and de-classed bureaucratism as the only viable 'solution'. The entire Congress resolution on the Alliance focused on exactly the same meaningless bureaucratic rhetoric that had characterised so many previous 'engagements' with the problems of the Alliance and the failure of COSATU to translate its organisational power into policy influence: a better functioning 'political centre'; another 'common programme' for the Alliance; regular Alliance 'Summits'; and, more Alliance 'structures' for debate and research (COSATU, 2000b).

No sooner had COSATU's Congress ended, than a ten-a-side 'mini' Summit of the Alliance was convened. The simply absurd became the seriously tragic. If there were any doubts about the political and strategic bankruptcy of the Alliance leadership then they were surely dispelled by the Summit's self-described purpose. Accordingly, the Alliance leadership 'charged' itself with 'ensuring that some consensus was reached on the challenges facing the country with regards to our economic development path, including areas of convergences and divergences' (ANC, SACP, COSATU Press Briefing, 2000). In other words, the main goal was to try and reach consensus on what they did and did not agree on.

In many ways, such a nonsensical 'goal' ironically, reflects the political character of the Alliance since 1994, if not before. The Alliance has allowed the ANC to keep COSATU within a political and organisational framework that pretends to serious strategic discussion and programmatic implementation, while the real political decisions are made in an ANC (both as political party and government) that is completely beyond the pale of its erstwhile Alliance partner. Practically this has meant that COSATU's effective influence over the politics of the state, decision-making and public policy has continuously been weakened through participation in a Alliance that provides political cover for the political party form of the ANC.<sup>14</sup> It has been an Alliance held together by historic sentimentalities and the continued dominance of a petit-bourgeois politics amongst the Alliance leadership.

The believability of the Alliance's public face of common strategic purpose and political functionality rests, solely, on the willingness and ability of the various Alliance leaders to make elite-compacts. This does not bode well for workers themselves, and even more so for those organisations like COSATU that represent a large portion. In South Africa's present economic and political circumstances, framed by the strategic vision and practical pursuit of a deracialised capitalism, such elitist compacts can only serve to further entrench the class interests of corporate capitalists and an emergent black bourgeoisie with a petit-bourgeois politics. The elite-led political corporatism of the Alliance will leave workers further divided and with consistently less effective leverage over socio-economic change.

Even more fundamentally, the political 'management of contradictions' that is meant to ensure the 'unity' of the Alliance, can only further serve to redirect working-class struggle away from where it needs to be - attacking the exploitative nature of capitalist productive and social relations. For example, what does COSATU's call for an Alliance agreement on industrial policy mean in the context of an economy in which private capital holds the vast majority of the wealth and controls the productive levers? Likewise, how is COSATU going to use the Alliance to force the state to 'successfully' implement a strategy of job

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<sup>14</sup> Similar points are made by Basset and Clark (2000).

creation if the 'people's' government is not, at the same time, willing to attack the basic productive control of the capitalists and to take key productive decisions effectively outside of the market? These are political questions that the COSATU leadership dare not ask as loyal members of an Alliance, dedicated as it is to the realisation of a vague NDR. Yet, they are questions that any workers' organisation must not only ask, but must find ways to concretely address.

The extent to which the Alliance has become a weight around the neck of workers was even more clearly revealed by the ANC's responses to COSATU's public sector strike in early 2000 and the anti-privatisation strike undertaken in mid-2001. Even though, after both strikes, the COSATU leadership dismissed any implied threat to the existence of the Alliance and called for yet more Alliance meetings to 'thrash out differences' (*Independent Online*, September 2001), the ANC National Executive Committee (NEC) felt threatened enough to attack what it called a 'left offensive' coming from within the ranks of COSATU. Concluding that there was 'an organised and loose, conscious and sub-conscious tendency in components of the Alliance, which has decided to launch a systematic assault on the ANC from the left', the ANC NEC warned that such a tendency desired 'to detach the working class from their organisation, the ANC ...' (ANC NEC, 2001). While there are certainly those within COSATU who have long argued for the need to politically detach COSATU from the Alliance, the COSATU leadership was once again quick to express its loyalty by 'recommitting' itself to the NDR and 'reaffirming our commitment to the tripartite alliance as the historic vehicle to drive this far-reaching national transformation' (COSATU CEC, 2001).

The debilitating strategic muddle, in which the leadership of COSATU now seems to permanently reside, is evident in the Central Executive Committee's discussion documents submitted to the COSATU-ANC bilateral meeting in early February 2002. On the one hand, there is finally the admittance that the Alliance has had no political programme since the abandonment of the *RDP*, an absence that has effectively 'hobbled if not totally paralysed ... our strategic advantage' (COSATU, 2002a, p.24). This is then confirmed, in a self-limiting manner, in a parallel document on 'The Role and Nature of the Alliance' that clearly notes, 'the absence of a strategy of implementing the RDP' (COSATU, 2002b, p.4). However, the same document proceeds to simply ignore that reality. Completely contradicting its own (correct) conclusions about the programmatic sterility of the Alliance, the COSATU leadership suggests, once again, that the main political task facing COSATU is to ensure that the 'Alliance must tightly coordinate its programme in pursuance of the NDR under the leadership of the ANC'. For COSATU's leaders, 'it follows that the main source of unity within the Alliance will be processes to generate policy and ensure its implementation' (COSATU, 2002b, p.8).

Evidently, for the COSATU leadership, such explicit political confusion and strategic contradiction provided a sound enough basis for the most successful political meeting with the ANC leadership since before 1994. In what sounded, distinctly, like a quintessential triumph of myth over reality, the COSATU leadership announced that, ‘the meeting marked the end of a period of tension in the relationship between the two organisations which has existed for some years ...’ (COSATU, 2002c). COSATU members must have been left, yet again, scratching their heads. One question that, no doubt, would have been on their minds was exactly how, in the course of a weekend meeting, could fundamental political and strategic differences, borne out of years of class struggle and so recently affirmed by their own leadership, be transformed into political unity around a common programme between COSATU and the ANC?

Despite this latest, and clearly dubious, attempt by the COSATU leadership to replace reality with large doses of political spin doctoring, an increasing number of workers in COSATU will not be fooled. As long as COSATU continues to believe that a strategically paralytic Alliance still represents the one and only revolutionary vehicle for transforming South African society, so too will it render working class struggles, and the broader struggle for socialism, that much less effective and meaningful. What is also becoming clearer to many workers is that the counter-argument – i.e., that any move towards the political and organisational independence of working class forces in South Africa, within such a hostile global and domestic environment, will necessarily lead to political marginalisation and a victory for capitalism - is sheer sophistry. Such a position is designed to further entrench an unequal political relationship within the Alliance that serves to tie COSATU into a false sense of ideological and strategic unity and continuously weaken its ability to fully engage in a class struggle that is both real and necessary.

The Alliance might continue to survive for some time, but for COSATU, there can be no political ‘third way’ in the longer-term. The need for an independent political presence that is created, controlled by, and carries out the political mandate of, the working class, is fundamental to any vision of COSATU playing a central role in defining and leading South African society.

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