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Spaces of Hope: Rethinking Trade Union–Community Alliances and Citizenship in a Post-alliance Era in South Africa

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ABSTRACT  A critical debate in contemporary post-1994 South Africa is the extent to which organised labour can join forces with community-based movements to construct coalitions which might be called ‘spaces of hope’ where policies more conducive to constructing an egalitarian society can be pursued. Using three organisations: the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) and Housing Assembly (HA) in Cape Town, this paper will explore coordinated labour–community interactions. It advances a new analytical framework for thinking about ways in which the poor in South Africa are mobilised to actualise their rights. In the new political and trade union landscape (post-Marikana and post-Numsa’s historical decision to dissociate from the ANC)—what I term the ‘post-alliance landscape’—new repertoires of protest and participation linked to national formations (such as Numsa who have called for a united front of the poor and working class leading to a new left party) are emerging. These emerging repertoires might help in promoting ‘shared spaces of citizenship’ where common issues and a feeling of shared fate can arise among sections of the broader oppressed. This paper will further suggest that while the social movement left criticises neo-liberalism, they have unwittingly helped the neoliberals because of their frequently ‘misplaced criticism’ of the trade unions and their attachments to specific organisational principles.

Introduction

There is a lot of misplaced criticism of unions only being interested in their members’ interests . . . Workers go home to communities and they access services. We are committed to a much broader transformation, than restricting ourselves to the workplace. We are a political trade union (Roger Ronnie, former South African Municipal Workers Union General-Secretary. (Delivery 2003, edition 3, 72)

. . . the working class cannot any longer see the ANC or the SACP as its class allies in any meaningful sense. . . . Since the first post-apartheid massacre took place in Marikana, it has been the view of Numsa that what happened on that day . . . marked a turning point in the
social and political life of South Africa. There is no chance of winning back the Alliance to what it was originally formed for, which was to drive a revolutionary programme for fundamental transformation of the country. NUMSA will lead in the establishment of a new United Front that will coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities, in a way similar to the UDF of the 1980s. (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa December 2013, 4–7)

A key issue in contemporary post-1994 South Africa which has forcefully re-surfaced since 2012 is the extent to which organised labour can join forces with community-based movements to construct overarching ‘spaces of hope’ to pursue policies more conducive to constructing an egalitarian society. This paper explores such overarching coordinated labour–community interactions through three organisations: the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), South African Municipal Workers Union (Samwu) and Housing Assembly (HA) in Cape Town. The three concerns addressed in this paper are: How have different scholars understood community–trade unions linkages? What is the shifting political landscape in 2013/2014 that might enable reciprocal and coordinated struggles between working class communities and organised labour in cities? How do grassroots activists and shopstewards articulate their desires for unity, building organisations and learning across the union–community divide? It advances a new analytical framework for thinking about ways in which the poor in South Africa are mobilised to actualise their rights.

In the new political and trade union landscape (post-Marikana and post-Numsa’s historical decision to dissociate from the ANC)—what I term the ‘post-alliance landscape’—new repertoires of protest and participation are more likely to emerge if linked to national formations (such as Numsa which have called for a united front of the poor and working class leading to a new left party). While many leftists have been sceptical about the progressive potential of trade unions (Lier and Stokke 2006; Barchiesi 2007b; Bond and Mottiar 2013), there is indeed a new political opportunity structure arising from the trade union initiated break-up of the ANC led alliance. This paper will further suggest that while the social movement left criticises neo-liberalism, they have unwittingly helped the neo-liberals because their ‘misplaced criticism’ of the trade unions has helped to demonise organised labour and impede community–trade unions linkages.

Using David Harvey’s critique of organisational fetishism as well as Thompson and Tapscott’s (2010) work on problems of ‘invited spaces’ in citizen participation, this paper explores the complexities of transformative struggles and citizenship. The paper proposes that organisational forms (trade unions and social movements) should be understood relationally, as processes that interact and potentially redefine each other. The paper draws on interviews with unionists and civic activists in Cape Town and participant observation by the author at workshops jointly attended by municipal shopstewards and a community housing forum (called the ‘Project’). Through the Project, it has been the first time at least since the late 1970s that Cape Town community activists have conversed and learnt alongside unionists in a non-sectarian environment. The Project
undertook a unique exercise to bring shopstewards and members of local housing committees based across the Cape flats into a learning alliance to promote a different kind of participation in the city that combines the workplace and living place.

Trade unions and the left critique

An enduring leitmotif in the politics of social movements has been the antagonism between social movements, located in specific places and trade unions, organised sectorally. For the workerist left, urban social movements were ‘populist’, amorphous multi-class entities focused on identity politics. They could also be dismissed as mere activist groups without mass support. The new social movements’ rejoinder was that trade unions over time have come to represent a narrow aristocracy of full-time workers who were increasingly a minority and who were being gradually replaced by a ‘precariat’. Trade unions, therefore, were becoming irrelevant in the neo-liberal era, given new realities of mass unemployment, casualisation and informalisation. Barchiesi (2007a, 39), who has done an extensive study of SAMWU, has articulated this view arguing that:

... the deepening crisis of stable employment that has characterized the South African transition radically challenges wage labour as an effective vehicle of social inclusion and the repository of collective identities and solidarity.

A once radical union, like Samwu, he argues, might retain social movement unionism rhetoric, but in reality, its focus has been increasingly on the interests of its declining permanent membership. Moreover, the middle-class careerism of most trade union leaders, militates against unions adopting an inclusive ‘social movement approach’ (Barchiesi 2007b). He concludes his study of SAMWU by pronouncing: ‘the failure of union–community alliances’ adding that this failure ‘casts a shadow over the future prospects of social movement unionism’.

Similarly sceptical is Xali (2006, 133), who insists that ‘there are structural impediments to closer relations between trade unions and emerging social movements’. He then lists the divergent compositional, institutional, political and organisational styles of trade unions versus social movements, concluding that although linkages may be desirable, they are not probable. There is very long history to this debate with roots in early movements such as the Marxists, syndicalist and anarchists. In South Africa, the debate was dubbed ‘the workerist-populist debate’ in the 1980s (Hindson 1987). But the fraught relationship between unions and community struggles has not been static.

Moreover, the simplistic notion that in South African history there were permanently hostile ideological groups is mistaken. These movements have learnt from each another; individuals moved from one movement to another (especially in the mid-1980s when many Black Consciousness movement leaders shifted to ANC politics). Mutual interactions and hybridisation therefore helped movements to define themselves and produce new hybrids (see Ruiters 2000). There was also a multiplicity of idioms, discourses and values that have interwoven so that radical strands across Fosatu, the United Democratic Front, and Black
Consciousness Movement and so on were combined while individual activists also crossed over from one organisation to another. Popular forms of township action such as toyi-toying, for example, came from Umkhonto we Sizwe camps. Many community organisations adopted the trade union shopfloor style of democracy. In fact, street committees (Ruiters 2011), developed in Cradock by Matthew Goniwe, combined the shopfloor trade union and street committees. Combining different spaces of struggle and upscaling was emphasised by the Committee of 81, an interschool forum to coordinate school boycotts and people’s education:

... one of the main lessons of 1976 ... was simply that we should not allow any serious action by black students to become isolated in the schools. If we allow the struggle to be isolated in the schools, we shall find ourselves complaining to and petitioning the capitalist rulers for no more than repairs to apartheid buildings in apartheid ghettos and group areas. (Cited in Staniland 2005, 48)

Unions have continued to play a central role in policy debates and political life (Buhlungu 2006) and might yet be the most important force for building new democratic institutions and a more egalitarian society in the South African context (Beckman, Buhlungu, and Sachikonye 2010; Fine and Ashman 2012; Maluleke 2013). A few examples: Cosatu has played an extraordinary role in championing diverse struggles by providing blistering critiques of the National Development Plan, E-Tolls as well as being self-critical about its role in the Marikana events. Vavi upbraided NUM saying that, ‘The branch leadership often assume the status of spokesperson for management. This is compounded by the fact that shop stewards allow management to dictate the agendas of monthly consultative meetings’ (Zwelinzima Vavi’s address to NUM’s Central Committee, 23 May 2013).

Along these radical lines in late 2013, Numsa resolved to organise all workers including casuals or outsourced workers.

We must reject management’s division of workers into ‘core’ and ‘non-core’ and organise every worker in workplaces that are in our sectors whether they are in cleaning, security, catering, health services or any other service that is provided in support of activities in our sectors.

It may be argued that identity-based politics prevents seeing connections and interdependencies between different ‘faces of oppression’ (see Young 1995) and different ways in which workers and poor communities are enmeshed in capital accumulation and resistance to it (Harvey 2012). But the theoretical basis for alliances across the broader working class depends not on erasing differences or situatedness (also see Young 1995). Neither does trade union involvement in struggles beyond workplaces easily resolve strategic and political questions such as the following: Should unions themselves organise township struggles (housing, water supply, education, food prices, and environment)? Should they help to form distinct local or national organisations or assist such organisations? What should be the relationship between unions and political parties? Are there ‘correct’ answers to these questions or are the answers contingent?
Formal industrial trade unions differ from residentially based organisations: first, the way they recruit members and second, their internal democratic processes differ. Unions recruit more or less homogenous social groups, whereas community organisations might be recruited from all classes in given neighbourhoods. The historical experience in South Africa, however, suggests that rigid attachment to a particular organisational form invited the kind of organisational fetishism that either led to splits or forced trade unions to rethink their relationship with communities. Hindson (1987, 209–213) provides an account and shows how Fosatu was forced to enter political action in the 1984 Transvaal stayaway or lose its politicised membership.

And, as Harvey (2012, 125) notes, ‘A fetishism of organizational preference (pure horizontality in social movements, for example) all too often stands in the way of exploring appropriate and effective solutions’ to problems that manifest at different scales. The left, as a whole, he argues ‘is bedevilled by an all-consuming fetishism of organizational form’. The fetishism of strategy also characterises recent counter-positions in debates over preferences for invited versus invented spaces (Parnell and Pieterse 2010). The traditional left, nationalists, trade unionists, and social movements of all kinds have too often promoted inflexible principles or stages of struggle (e.g. the two-stage theory of the South African Communist Party) to be mechanically applied as the ‘only correct’ strategic line. Such dogmatism, argues Harvey, has obstructed the formation of overarching organizations that can accommodate difference but take on the global problems that confront us (Harvey 2012).

The Democratic Alliance (DA) blame the trade unions for unemployment and argue that ‘big businesses and big unions dominate collective bargaining councils’ while fighting for an ‘open opportunity society for all . . . that allows each and every citizen that so wishes to . . . actively participate in the economy in accordance with his or her desires’ (http://www.da.org.za). Therefore, while DA frontally attacks labour unions, the workerists struggle to understand the potential of social movements, social movement theorists and activists continue to struggle to reappraise their own negative assessments of trade unions or at least accept the complexity in the trade union arena. The social movement left is often an unwitting contributor to the demonisation of trade unions as Fraser (2009) has suggested.

The Marikana moment: shattering myths about South African politics
The Marikana moment shattered the myth that organised labour was simply becoming a narrow-minded labour aristocracy and that unions were incapable of representing the collective interest of their membership. The killing of more than 34 workers in the SA platinum mines in 2012 and the forming of a new union, Amalgamated Mining and Construction Union (AMCU) has tested several long-held myths. The rise of AMCU not only heralded the raising of new labour militancy based on ‘impossible’ wage demands for R12,500 a month, it was also a turning point in the ruling ANC alliance with COSATU
and community–trade union linkages (Maluleke 2013). Maluleke (2013) also argues that Marikana was indeed a ‘massacre’ and that it signalled the end of the ‘honeymoon’. All the people killed by the state were black.

The Marikana strike was not confined to the miners or to the company premises, but involved many sectors in the community—women, the unemployed and youth joined the workers on the hill for the daily rallies and provided support before and after the massacre (Chinguno 2013). The Marikana platinum strike and massacre involved entire families, not only striking miners. The mine capitalist and the financial system (specifically loan sharks), lawyers—accumulation by dispossession—were centrally implicated (Fine and Ashman 2012).2

The birth of AMCU, NUM’s sudden loss of a majority union status, the ferocity of platinum workers’ demands and the intensity of resistance surprised most political analysts. Many scholars and commentators, relying on evidence from shop-steward surveys (Buhlungu 2006 and Naledi Workers Survey), had argued that mine workers in NUM were fiercely pro-ANC and pro-alliance. Others suggested that only ‘nine percent of union members join unions to change society’ (cited in Chiwota 2013, 37). As late as 2013, many analysts still defended that long-standing axiom of South African politics—that the ANC–COSATU alliance was a historical fact and the alliance was unlikely to crack. Pillay (2008) thus likened the Alliance to an elastic band that could stretch. He argues that

as long as the ANC meets some of the demands of its worker allies (such as a relatively protected labour market), and as long as COSATU remains representative of mainly permanent workers, it is unlikely to stretch (the alliance) to breaking point in the immediate future. (Pillay 2008, 299)

Bond and Mottiar (2013) also pour cold water on the prospects for a more consistent left force emerging within trade unions which they argue is a remote possibility. Hence, South Africa’s top commentators on social movements and left politics err in their view of the ANC alliance, the potential for left politics in the unions and so on. They also understate the crucial role of trade unions, where they have been strong such as in South Africa and parts of Europe in defending workers’ living standards, reducing wage differences between genders and maintaining wages of organised workers at more than double that of unorganised workers (Harvey 1996; Fraser 2009; Cosatu 2012).

There is a need to look closely at how new political dynamics and changing political alignments, conjunctures and landscapes open spaces for a profoundly different politics that overcomes old attachments, narrow localisms, and single-issue struggles, and provides more opportunities for using invented and invited spaces. Trade unions in a post-Alliance South Africa have become a lot more interested in building alliances for city-wide struggles for unifying public services in the city, over citizenship and re-appropriating the city as a political community in Arendtian and Marxian sense. So, how might urban struggles be both trade unions struggles and citizenship struggles? In the next section, we briefly examine the importance of broad-based community movements for building citizenship.
Spaces of hope: linking substantive citizenship, community and workers in the city

The first two acts of the Paris Commune were to abolish night-work in the bakeries (a labour question) and to impose a moratorium on rents (an urban question). (Harvey 2012, 120)

With apartheid’s formal demise, radical citizen action was no longer required by the ANC in government—hence, orderly reconstruction became the party line. The masses were asked to wait in line and be patient since service delivery could not happen overnight. This paternalistic-institutional view was reflected by scholars who have argued that the poor can be best served by reducing institutional exclusions and by a civil society that engages the state in constructive ways. Others say that the state’s communication strategies might be poor (Municipal IQ 2009) while Parnell and Pieterse (2010) argue that ‘grassroots pressure that remains stuck in an oppositional mode without explicit propositional demands tied to concrete institutional reforms’. These scholars further suggest that...

...The ongoing focus on electoral and participatory democracy ... may marginalize new efforts to advance 2nd generation socio-economic rights. These are achieved through the sustained delivery of affordable urban services to households and neighbourhoods and through viable service administration and finances. (Parnell and Pieterse 2010, 148)

Getting an ID book and postal addresses right might be a far better strategy, argues Parnell, than joining a ‘one dimensional’ protest (Parnell and Pieterse 2010). They note:

The allocation of free basic services to all households is a constitutional right in South Africa. Yet, even if they wanted to, City governments are unable to roll out service subsidies to the poor because they lack the institutional capacity to do so (Parnell and Pieterse 2010, 152).

And, as Rasool (former Western Cape ANC premier) noted, the agenda for common citizenship needs to be realistic: ‘it is unthinkable that a shack can built next a R3 million mansion’ (cited in McDonald 2008).

Yet, citizenship denotes more than ‘service delivery’ or having a limited say in a ward committee (Thompson and Nleya 2010, 19). Thompson and Nleya argue that services are embedded in localities with grievances about socio-environmental conditions (crime, unemployment, social isolation from main cities and so on) that go beyond what is narrowly framed as ‘service delivery’. Similarly, we can argue that ‘class’ denotes more than ownership/non-ownership of the means of production. Likewise, urban citizenship is much more than passing through public spaces. Class is about how persons relate to the entire process of accumulation in addition to their ownership relations to the means of production (Harvey 2012, 129).

The dynamics of class exploitation are not confined to the workplace. Whole economies of dispossession and of predatory practices, ... with respect to housing markets, are a case in point. These secondary forms of exploitation are primarily organized by merchants, landlords, and the financiers; and their effects are primarily felt in the living space, not in the...
According to Hannah Arendt, the substance of citizenship is an activity based on collective processes where individuals get together to discuss, debate and act on collective matters in public. To enjoy substantive citizenship implies much more than formal political rights and access to basic services: being a citizen ought to mean one can occupy and constitute public spaces without compromising one’s self-identity and social dignity (Painter and Chris 1995, 115). The inter-citizen relationship is intimately linked to what Hannah Arendt has called ‘shared spaces of citizenship’ where common issues and a feeling of shared fate can arise. This she calls ‘concertation in common projects and problems’. Such concertation of citizens means that when we speak or act we do so, not as bounded entities, but indivisibly (I speak as a trade unionist, but wearing all my hats as it were). Our reality, argues Arendt, depends ‘utterly’ on making our private thoughts feelings and senses public where they can be evaluated and shared. The ‘spaces of appearance’ are created and nourished by human activity or common projects. These spaces of appearance may be demonstrations, town hall meetings, and campaigns for public housing and so on.

For Arendt, then, public life is all about creating a transcending political community, it is not about organic community. Genuine public activity therefore presumes a shared world of institutions, everyday interactions and a ‘relative durable context for our activities’ (Passerin d’Entreves 1992, 146). These common spaces and public goods allow the citizens to develop an ability to listen and respect, but not with the intimacy associated with ethnic or organic communities (Passerin d’Entreves 1992, 151).

Harvey (1996, 118) shows that citizen formation is profoundly linked to residential areas (which) provide distinctive milieus for social interaction from which individuals to a considerable degree derive values, expectations, consumption habits, market capacities and states of consciousness . . . linked to a whole set of attitudes, values and expectations as well as distinct skills.

Bourgeois suburbs are exclusionary ‘communities’ fundamentally based on improving the exchange value of homes. Harvey (2012, xiv) also argues that,

The important and ever-expanding labour of making and sustaining urban life is increasingly done by insecure, often part-time and disorganized low-paid labour. . . . How such disparate groups may become self-organized into a revolutionary force is the big political problem. And part of the task is to understand the origins and nature of their cries and demands.

Harvey (2012, 120) laments that,

within the Marxist tradition, for example, urban struggles tend to be either ignored or dismissed as devoid of revolutionary potential or significance. Such struggles are construed as being either about issues of reproduction rather than production, or about rights, sovereignty, and citizenship, and therefore not about class.
Workers’ everyday lives mean that they are in ‘networks of social relations by virtue of the multifaceted aspects of their lives. To gain leverage in conflicts with employers, workers can draw on these social connections.’ Citizen struggles involving labour unions are about ‘the capacity of workers to expand the scope of conflict by involving other, non-labour actors’ what Wills and Simms (2004) call ‘coalitional power’. However, limiting solidarity to organic connections does not constitute citizenship in Arendt or Harvey’s framework.

Miraftab’s research in South Africa has been notable for exploring the link between cities as workplaces, citizenship and living spaces.

The racialized system of labor exploitation meshed with the spatial organization of apartheid cities, which segregated racialized populations to maintain social hierarchies. White areas are orderly … law abiding, controlled predictable and safe …. Black areas are volatile, wild. (Miraftab 2007, 604)

In places like Cape Town, the limits of ‘invited spaces’ of participation, blocked participation (Miraftab 2007; Thompson and Nleya 2010) have been recently documented. The unresponsiveness of the state has been identified as the main driver behind the tidal wave of violent service delivery protests. Municipal IQ has stressed the legitimacy of the protests and the need for the state to be more responsive. Studies have also indicated the rise of a repressive local state apparatuses, which now play a much bigger role in policing everyday life in cities and townships (Lemanski 2006; Miraftab 2007). In Cape Town, there are eight separate metro police units; most infamously, the anti-land invasion unit.

Recent work by Thompson and Nleya (2010) and Tapscott (2010) more importantly focuses on the objective reality that we have more or less untransformed urban landscapes in all SA’s major cities after 20 years of ‘post’ apartheid. This reality forces an engagement with alternative visions of the city that go beyond basic needs (and the NDP). Regrettably, despite basic services being delivered in many instances and despite the upgrading of townships, the structure of feeling in such townships (mass unemployment, dirt, density and danger) are still omnipresent features of ‘environmental racism’ (Ruiters 2001). The SACities Network (SACN 2009) argues that ‘development trends since 1994 have tended to reinforce apartheid spatial planning and townships continue to be disadvantaged’. Researchers and government have limited the scope of the policy agenda to upgrading apartheid colonial spaces by and improving transport between racial spaces, so most South Africans while still trapped in townships may occasionally access benefits of city amenities and city life in the white-dominated economy.

Therefore, in South Africa, a shared space of concertation and common action between ‘race’ groups has been sorely lacking, but this divide has also characterised organisations such as trade unions and civics. The SA middle-class property owner (still largely white) is more dedicated to the militant defence of property values, privileged access to public and private services (e.g. private schools and hospitals), secure lifestyles and thus indirectly to maintaining South Africa’s grotesque inequalities. Rather than build common citizenship with bonds of solidarity and mutual respect across class and race, elites have engaged in militant separatism.
And, community groups have too often taken an overly hostile approach to organised labour. Citizenship has been territorialised, tiered, institutionally fragmented and denuded in South Africa. Citizenship, in the Arendtian mode, would require a significant social–geographical levelling and more integrated common spaces as contemplated by the three movements (Numsa and so on) in case studies to be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Case study 1: The 2013 ‘Numsa moment’

During the 1980s and 1990s, Numsa (previously MAWU) was the most radical affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Forest 2011). It was seen as a hard-line workerist union (led by its ideologue Alec Erwin) who along with several others consistently held that the ‘independent political interests of the working class’ should be secured and that ‘disciplined alliances with progressive community and political organisations needed to be pursued’ (cited in Baskin 1991, 92). Numsa and its predecessor Mawu formally resolved ‘that socialism should be built and that the unions should work with organisations that accept socialism as the goal’ (Baskin 1991, 100). Moreover, in 1993, Numsa sponsored a resolution for a workers’ party tabled at Cosatu Congress. This came under heavy attack from Jeremy Cronin and the SACP as an unthinkable and reactionary idea that was originally dreamed up by the apartheid regimes’ spies (Cronin 1993). The resolution stated:

Once an Interim Government of National Unity is established and the ANC is part of it, we should not have a formal alliance with the ANC. We should deal with the ANC as part of the government of the day through engagements in forums such as the NEF (National Economic Forum), NMC (National Manpower Commission).

The resolution committed the union to ‘look at new forms of organisation that will unify the working class .... This could take the form of a working class party’.

In 1987, it had about 180,000, but by late 2013, its membership had grown to over 338,000 (Numsa website). Significantly, by 2013, while other unions (NUM for example) were losing members, Numsa grew by 38,000 members. In December 2013, the union adopted unprecedented positions:

NUMSA will lead in the establishment of a new United Front that will coordinate struggles in the workplace and in communities, in a way similar to the UDF of the 1980s. The task of this front will be to fight for the implementation of the Freedom Charter and to be an organisational weapon against neoliberal policies such as the NDP. For this to happen our members and shopstewards must be active on all fronts and in all struggles against neoliberal policies, whether these policies are being implemented in the workplace or in communities.

Echoing the 1993 resolution, it resolved that:

Side by side with the establishment of the new United Front, Numsa will explore the establishment of a Movement for Socialism as the working class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa. We
will look at countries such as Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Greece. We will examine their programmes with the aim of identifying elements of what may constitute a revolutionary programme for the working class.

The SACP, remarked NUMSA General Secretary, Irvin Jim, was ‘embedded in President Jacob Zuma’s government and no longer represented the aspirations of workers’.

The NUMSA view is that the ANC–SACP is incurably undemocratic in its internal operations. ‘The ANC leadership has clarified that it will not tolerate any challenge’. In late February 2014, the Western Cape NUMSA region inaugurated its ‘rolling mass action against the government’s youth wage subsidy with a picket outside Parliament’. NUMSA was joined by the so-called ‘NUMSA Nine’. The unions were joined by civil society organisations such as Equal Education, Progressive Youth Movement, Abahlali baseMjondolo, the HA, Youth Development Council and the Alternative Information & Development Centre (Aboobaker 2014).

NUMSA’s Irwin Jim noted:

From where we sit as national office-bearers, there are two forms of organisations that are required now. A front or coalition that can co-ordinate struggles both in the workplace and in the communities in a way similar to the UDF in the 1980s. The two positions in Cosatu represent specific class interests and are proxies for the ongoing class struggles inside South Africa in general and in Cosatu itself.’ (Independent online IOL, 24 November 2013)

The NUMSA declaration in the context of Marikana represents a shake-up of the Alliance and probably a watershed in South African contemporary politics.

**Case study 2: Samwu**

The South African Municipal Workers’ Union (SAMWU), with 180,000 members, is the largest union that directly provides services that produce cities. Founded in 1987, it has embarked on many strikes against Local Authorities’ as well as national government’s privatisation of public services policies (Pape 2001). It also organises across different public services such as local health community services, water and sanitation, refuse collection, roads and storm water drainage, electricity distribution, public transportation, Metro police, and parks and recreation amongst others. These services fundamentally support urban life and citizenship and how they get delivered and at what prices, levels of access and within which organisational and spatial regimes also matters profoundly to senses of citizenship. Unions, like Samwu, have the proven ability to disrupt a city economy as was shown in their temporary blockades and takeover of public spaces in parts of major cities during strikes (Mail and Guardian, 14 April 2010).

More than most other Cosatu affiliates, Samwu has maintained a consistent citizenship stance opposed to the privatisation and commodification of public services and it has had a critical view of the ANC within the local state arena.
(McDonald and Ruiters 2012). The ties with the ANC have, however, created internal battles with the union and this has sometimes muted its resistance to the state (McDonald and Ruiters 2005, 36). At its Seventh National Congress in 2003, the union reaffirmed its opposition to the privatisation of services and corporatisation of municipal departments and called for the outright banning of ‘pre-payment (water) meters because of the danger to the health and life of poor communities’ (cited in McDonald and Ruiters 2005, 129). It resolved to ‘fight to have those services that have already been privatised returned to the ambit of local government.’ The 2006 Congress noted that both national and local governments’ approach reflected ‘an ideological attachment to the reduction of jobs, the casualisation of jobs, and a widening gap that privileges an elite management group that moves alongside with the capitalist class.’

The same Congress noted that SALGA, ‘Accepts wholeheartedly the effects of globalization in destroying permanent jobs and replacing them with fixed-term contracts and job insecurity.’ Every Congress has rejected neo-liberal urbanism as anti-working class (Samwu 2013 Press statement, 29 August 2013).

Over the years, Samwu has drafted several submissions to proposed national legislation and local Integrated Development Plans. The union has also often taken strikes into the cities. For example, in 1997, it embarked on a national campaign of action to force the government, through SALGA, to agree on a protocol on local government restructuring. In Cape Town, as a test of the nationally agreed protocol, Samwu successfully took Tygerberg municipality to court for seeking to outsource refuse services without public participation.

At its 2003 Congress, Samwu noted that, ‘... the Alliance should operate as independent and equal partners’; the same resolution observes that, ‘... the relationship between government and the Alliance is not clearly defined’ and that, ‘... the attacks on workers by government impacts (sic) negatively on the functioning of the Alliance.’ In 2010, President Zuma signalled a further political attack on municipal workers, when he stated, ‘... we are of the firm view that municipal employees should not hold leadership positions in political parties’ (Jacob Zuma January 8th Statement 2010). Samwu was quick to condemn this view as an attack on unions and a breach of the right to freedom of association (Samwu Press Statement 2010).

In 2011, the SAMWU NEC issued a statement on the eve of the 2011 municipal elections that threatened withdrawal of the union’s support for a vote for the ANC. Among other things, the NEC questioned whether ANC was ‘worker friendly’, accusing the ruling party of ignoring the ‘dire straits of working class communities’, and ‘bias towards capitalism’. It called for a purging of capitalist ‘elements’ from the ANC, noting the catalogue of deaths and serious injury at the hands of police during strikes and protests, and noted the ‘concerted campaign’ of the police and security forces, ‘in collaboration with municipalities, ... to undermine legitimate trade union action’.

In Cape Town, SAMWU challenged the privatisation of the City Abattoir, the Company Gardens and the Epping Fresh Produce Market in the courts. The union has also challenged the transfer of ambulance services from the Local Authority to
the Provincial Government, believing that this would lead to workers’ losing benefits and increased fees for ambulance services. The union has even campaigned against the privatisation of publicly owned childcare facilities—successfully so in the case of the Bonteheuwel and Bellville areas (Xali 2006).

Case study 3: the housing assembly (Cape Town) and the project

Cape Town has seen more local township protests than any other part of the country in 2012/2013. The City also has the biggest housing backlog (450,000 households live in unfit dwellings) and the worst delivery track-record for housing in the country. Housing and related services are by far the biggest cause of the protests.

Protest has a long history in Cape Town’s working class areas. The Cape Flats and Northern areas have episodically seen joint community and worker actions linked to early late 1970s struggles (Fattis and Monis strike, bus boycotts, school stayaways, Parents and Students action committees, street committees and the campaigns led by CAHAC and later the UDF) and the 1980s stayaways (Staniland 2005). Regrettably, not enough scholarly work has been published on understanding that period in the Cape Town area, although there have been a flurry of Ph.D.s trying to understand that local history.

The anti-privatisation movements such as the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF) led mainly by the anti-ANC left in SA after 2000 were not able to grow their action committees into durable mass movements and even as early as 2003 were characterised as ‘deeply fractured’ (Hart 2013, 33). As Murray (2013) argues ‘by the middle of the decade, due to the unsuccessful campaigns, a lack of resources, activist fatigue, internal divisions and state coercion, most of these organisations had dissolved or receded into relative obscurity’. Since 2005, thousands of disparate service delivery protests and new political parties have largely eclipsed the social movement left, although many overly optimistic predictions in the mid-2000s of an organised united left emerged out of the APF and similar groups (see Bond 2011). Buhlungu (2006) noted: ‘The APF and its affiliates do not seem to have made serious inroads in terms of organising casual and full-time employed workers.’ Most crucially, social movements such as the APF collapsed largely because of internal leadership fights over organisational issues of the kind discussed by Harvey with his notion of organisational fetishism and inflexible tactics. There was a trend among social movement ideologues to focus on the ‘poors’ also called the ‘multitudes’ as some special new social category with privileged social agency and to dismiss organised labour as a labour aristocracy and hence consistent interaction with other forces such as Cosatu (Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006; Pithouse 2007).

The HA was formed in 2008 around the issue of housing and access to urban land in Cape Town. The HA participants have been almost all unemployed activists and mostly women who have taken up housing-related struggles while trying to build organisation in their areas in the Cape Flats. Some were formal members of the HA, while many were also activists associated with Abahlali
baseMjondolo (based especially in QQ Section in Khayelitsha, Langa and Philippi). Others have been previously involved in the now defunct Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign and a number came from areas such as Mitchell’s Plain where more recent occupations/anti-eviction struggles have taken place. Thus, in the last few years, many diverse types of protest groups have mushroomed, many have died out, but new ones kept re-emerging often when major organisations like the ANC experienced internal divisions or when new parties such as Economic Freedom Fighters arose.

Unlike the APF who became defeatist about mainstream trade unions, the HA has strong belief that workers and community organisations need to find ways to co-evolve. Most of the HA activists struggle to make ends meet. As Blake (2013, 7) notes,

Their households survive on grant income or meager amounts from occasional short-term employment. Halls have to be hired and activists often struggle to get to meetings because they do not have the taxi fare. Regular meetings and consistent activities are a key element in building organization and the collective confidence in the ability to effect change. A lack of financial and other resources impacts on the attendance and frequency of meetings and the overall efforts to sustain activities.

The participants’ views expressed in the joint community–worker workshops about what a ‘better life’ means are notable:

we had high expectations but things have hardly changed since 1994; the majority has been ‘left behind; in 1994, what was meant was ‘a better life’ for the previously disadvantaged, today only rich people have the best; we do not want modified hokkies.

And in now familiar refrain, participants regretted that ‘better’ can and often has meant only a ‘little better than before’; better ‘keeps inequality in place . . . the same class structure remains’. They observed that ‘to move from being homeless to having a shack is “better” but less suffering means there is still suffering’. As another activist remarked: ‘a good or the best life for all can only be achieved through collective struggle. Why should we want only small steps when what we need is a jump’?

The Project is a very good thing because we need the Housing Assembly so that community organizations can use Samwu’s knowledge of engaging the City. Samwu’s got the structure, Samwu’s got the resources to say look here let’s move with this. You’ve got an objective; you’ve got an aim to engage. With Samwu you’ve got the union and the city that engage on some issues and this is how this can be used as a platform to engage because Samwu can open doors for communities to engage . . . it is a very vital partnership that will be able to bring the city and force the city to engage communities and that’s very important. If we want the city to make a turn, a 180, we need those three partners to engage vigorously with the IDP, engage the city, and engage the councillors. We talked about cross-subsidization that is a thing that needs to be forced on the city by the communities. (Interview 12 June 2012)

The workshops discussed the City of Cape Town’s (CCT) IDP, specifically its ‘strategic focus areas and how participants could transform the city’. Under
the DA leadership, the city had adopted seven strategic focus areas over the previous term (2007–2012): growth and development; infrastructure/services; public transport; human settlements; safety/security; health, social and human capital development; and good governance/regulated reform. The new 2013 IDP, however, reduced these to five strategic focus areas: the opportunity city; the safe city; the caring city; the inclusive city; and the well-run city. Participants were asked what it would take to transform Cape Town into a ‘caring city’ and they answered:

Change the mayor; our own councillors; consultation; expose the City change policies; change the politics; change the framework; a collective response with clear demands; quality mechanisms for participation education and training of working class communities.

According to a HA facilitator,

Preparations for the drafting of a joint Samwu/HA submission on the CCT’s IDP documents included a training session on the topic and a series of task team meetings. In the end, we managed to hand over a six-page submission on the due date. Copies were made and circulated in Samwu and to all the Housing Assembly organizations. It served as a useful basis for presentations and discussions in area meetings as well as for engaging the CCT in the meetings they organized around the draft IDP. The submission formalized our engagement of the City. In the first place the City has failed to respond to our submission and we will pressure them for an explanation. We anticipate that this will serve to expose their lack of commitment to genuine participation. Every episode of engagement can and must serve to grow the understanding of the Project participants both individually and collectively. (Blake 2013, 12)

The fact that this is a joint submission is of huge significance. Two constituencies of the working class that for years have operated on parallel tracks and engaged the City in different ways and on different issues, have in this case combined forces. As the HA facilitator explained,

In preparation for City-convened meetings on the draft IDP, a meeting was called by HA organizations in Gugulethu, Grassy Park and Tafelsig. In Gugulethu, as part of the build up to a City-convened meeting in the area, the Backyard Dwellers (an affiliate of the HA) organized a successful march of local residents that was also attended by other HA and Samwu representatives. (Blake Interview 2013)

Now, there is a platform for further debate and discussion that will surely enrich the understanding of both parties and strengthen the basis for unity.

HA activists tend towards cynicism of political parties—the idea was expressed that ‘we are tired of parties that divide us . . .’. One HA leader from Khayelitsha commented that ‘if we can come to our senses . . . let us unite and leave these parties alone and create unity. If we create that unity, we will really achieve what we are wanting’ (Interview 27 July 2012, cited in Murray 2013).

Opposed to the fetishism that rejects all participation, the HA representatives from most areas also attended Cape Town Council Meetings where the IDP and the Budget were on the agenda. ‘It was very useful to witness the council debates that involved all parties. The experience helps us to deepen our
understanding of the workings of the City and the Council and thereby helps to sharpen our critique’ suggested one participant (Interview, cited in Blake 2013). Project participants helped to organise local meetings in Gugulethu, Tafelsig and Grassy Park in preparation for the CCT meetings convened around the IDP. At these meetings, the housing activists introduced the IDP, raised key points of criticism and invited people to make submissions. A worker leader in the Project workshop, (2013) remarked ‘Municipal workers also live in shacks. Furthermore, many well-paid union members are in serious debt and find it hard to meet bond payments or are paying high rent.’

Another significant collaboration took place when workers employed on the expanded public works projects (EPWP) approached Samwu about their grievances related to wages, contracts and conditions of service. The union agreed to help them to get organised and take up their issues jointly. The Gugulethu Backyard Dwellers (affiliated to HA) were specifically invited by Samwu to attend a meeting with the EPWP workers in the area. Samwu then called for a meeting with the HA, at which it suggested a joint march and a joint memorandum. Despite little time for preparations, the march went ahead. Protestors called for equal rights for temporary workers who earned R60 a day, whereas permanent city workers earned around R260 a day (Independent Online, 5 July 2012, ‘Cape Town Manager responds to protest’).

These joint activities have served to strengthen the capacity of movements and trade unions to critically engage the City, challenge its assumptions, raise alternatives, widen the space for further engagement and gain a tangible sense of influencing political processes and dynamics. Here, three important components of the working class—organised workers, unorganised underemployed workers and unemployed housing activists—linked arms to openly engage the City, challenging its neo-liberal policies and demanding a response. The memorandum was handed over and the Council has since responded.

Additionally, improved relations and more trust between shopstewards and civic activists can be gleaned from shopstewards’ comments below:

‘The two groups both participated in a positive way’; ‘I met and made friends’; ‘almost all comrades participated constructively’; the workshops ‘equip you’, ‘broaden your mind’, ‘you hear other people’s views’. We managed to engage with one another, i.e. Samwu and community activists.’ ‘The idea of the Project is excellent and came in the right time where we need all the sources to help the poorest of the poor’ ‘we need to have more of this Project’. ‘I loved this workshop. It was an eye-opener. I don’t think there is a company that would teach me what I have learnt these past two days... The combination of the housing activists and worker leaders was excellent. I have learnt so much and respect the type of work that they are doing in the communities.

A Samwu shopsteward noted:

I found the level of political consciousness among the working class activists surprising and unexpectedly high. I was very impressed by their level of understanding, their obvious commitment, their friendliness and acceptance of us. I do feel all shopstewards and community activists should be exposed to this workshop.

436
A HA member concluded:

Everyone is now united on bread and butter issues, although we have different political beliefs.’ … ‘Invite me again because these types of workshops are educational especially when it comes to people who live in the location because people do not know their rights, where they stand, that is why the government and the law, etc. are taking advantage of them. We had a lot to learn from the Samwu comrades.

These micro-processes of alliance formation and acts of public citizenship are fundamental to the slow molecular rebuilding of social forces for transformation. This can also be seen in new spaces of public art and the mobilisation of indigenous cultural forces as exemplified, in the ‘Gugulective’ art movement and performances of urban resistance seen in the Infecting the City programme (Makhubu 2013). Lazar, an anthropologist, writing on Bolivia’s El Alto with its complex mosaic of social movements and unions that led to the coming to power of Morales shows that in building a broad base of mobilisation, the cultural and performative dimensions of public citizenship are vital. Lazar emphasises: ‘the nested affiliation of an alliance of associations, each one with local forms of accountability, is one of the sources of the social movements’ strength in Bolivia.’ (2008) Such ‘nested forms’ of association seem to be possible and are already emerging in a new and reconstituted left that embraces the heterogeneity and multiplicity of the working class constituencies and is less dogmatic about the ‘correct’ organisational forms.

Conclusions

In their hey-day, South African left social movements adopted approaches that effectively excluded engagement through participation in the ‘invited’ spaces, such as IDP/Budget processes. Many also adopted the ‘horizontalist organisational posture’ and remained very wary of the trade unions, seen as serving narrow interests of a diminishing stratum of permanent workers. Having given up on the trade unions, their preference was for organised direct action around key issues facing the poor. As noted, although much of that generation of South African anti-capitalist movements has died out, there are thousands of protests happening organised by disparate local groups.

This paper suggested that South Africa has entered a qualitatively new period following Marikana and the Numsa decision to end all support for the ANC. We should therefore be re-examining the new political opportunities that exist for combining strategies and action by trade unions and protest groups in ways that maximise collective action alongside institutional channels for engagement of the state. The premature ‘insurrectionism’ implicit in some of the scholarship on protest in South Africa (see Alexander 2010 who suggests that protests are ‘reaching insurrectionary proportions’) understates the need for more coordinated forms of large-scale and upscaled contestation including substantive electoral coalitions between movements, unions and political parties.
The Left-wing unions (the ‘NUMSA Nine’) are far more resourced than local community protest groups, and advocate using a variety of strategies to mobilise and organise members and non-members. These unions are playing a more strident role in helping to lead and coordinate protests by the dozens of groups, committees, land invasion groups, and civics that have been surfacing all over SA (also see Cape Times 26 February 2014, 3 for a list of some of the new and old groups scattered across Cape Town). The sheer range of these groups—from ‘sanitation activist’ to disgruntled Central Unity Taxi Association drivers excluded by the MyCiti bus system to ANC dissent poor protestors to the ‘lost City’ residents to the Ses’Khona People’s Rights movement—attests to a vibrant emerging urban citizenship culture. More sustained protests and simultaneously more sustained uses of invited spaces can be part of how coalitional power is built. In that respect, a number of recent cases of successful coalitions in Latin America and West and North Africa show organised labour democratically occupying a leading role or acting as a vital organisational network and resource base for social movements, which have brought about changes in the political balance of forces (Beckman 2012; Spronk and Terhorst 2012; Wainwright 2012).

Municipalities can be engaged in formal processes or outside of these processes through a variety of other means involving the mobilisation of one or another constituency. They can take a confrontational or non-confrontational form. While it is important to participate in municipal processes in which they can openly engage and challenge local government officials and political representatives, at the same time they should organise and mobilise independently of government. The Samwu–HA Project’s current activities suggest an approach that excludes a formal partnership with the CCT. At the same time, it includes direct engagement of the CCT in its ‘invited’ participatory processes, but in tandem with independent activities that directly challenge and confront the CCT.

As the former Vice Chancellor of UCT and novelist wrote recently,

Amcu may represent a historic notification . . . Strangely, the miners of Marikana, armed and fortified with belief, lived and died with their honour, while their adversaries must pray that they have not lost theirs. If they have, they will have to commit to work to restore it through a radical renewal of South African politics and public life. (Ndebele 2013, 113)

Such renewal is unlikely to come from the ruling groups in South Africa. It requires rebuilding from below and day-to-day acts of solidarity between all sections of the oppressed. The Project (Samwu and HA) in a small way promotes an independent ‘whole’ working class approach and seeks to facilitate independent class organisation and mobilisation. It promotes an independent engagement of government both through participation in IDP and budget processes, and in its own chosen spaces through collective action and mobilisation. Samwu worker leaders and housing activists, linked to the two constituencies they represent, can play an important role both in their respective constituencies and also through the joint activities in drawing these key elements of class politics and civic urbanism together. Re-imagining community, class and citizenship requires
a radical universalistic project linked to building solidarities and upscaling these to united front style working class politics.

These spaces of hope are the transgressive spaces that efface the usual institutional boundaries of bourgeois order, where everyone knows their place. Being out of place is a direct threat to order; trade unions which no longer respect their operational geographies by being outside their usual spaces; workers acting as citizens and ‘community’ organisations which ‘interfere with production issues’, citizens as workers are the moments which provide unprecedented scope for emancipatory action.

Notes

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1. *Spaces of Hope* is the title of David Harvey’s 1998 book which explores ‘the terms and spaces of political struggles’ in what he terms ‘extraordinary times’.

2. Like Marikana in South Africa, Nigeria and North Africa revolts have been either backed by or led by *organised labour*. The 2012 uprising that shook Nigeria was against attempt by the Federal Government which tried to ‘liberalise’ petrol pump prices (more than doubling the price). Met with unprecedented resistance, reminiscent of the ‘Arab Spring’, the experience calls for more analysis of the power of trade unions and the role of trade unions in alliance with civic and other organisations in the informal economy (Beckman 2012).

3. The Numsa Nine comprised the South African Catering Commercial and Allied Workers Union, the Communication Workers Union, the Public and Allied Workers Union of South Africa, the Food and Allied Workers Union, the South African Municipal Workers Union, the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa, the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union, the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers Union and the Commercial Stevedoring Agriculture and Allied Workers Union.

4. In 2013, the Housing Assembly had the following affiliates: Gugulethu Backyard Dwellers, Tafelsig Residents Unite, Delft Integrated Network, Overcome Heights Integrated Development Settlement, AbM Western Cape (Khayelitsha, Langa), Blikkiesdorp Concerned Residents, Makaza Community Forum, Newfield’s Village AEC, Suqalo Informal Settlement, Zille-Raine Heights, Informal Settlements In Struggle, Tafelsig Community Forum, Women For Development, Tafelsig ActiveYouth, Makaza Youth Forum and the Phillippi Socialist Youth Movement.

References


