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After Marikana: Can NUMSA mobilize the South African working class against neoliberalism?

The resolutions adopted at the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's (Numsa's) congress in December 2013 mark an important rupture in South African politics. Numsa, the Congress of South African Trade Unions' (Cosatu's) largest affiliate, has refused to endorse the African National Congress (ANC) ahead of this year's elections and is to explore the establishment of a new movement for socialism. This is a significant challenge to the increasingly contested leadership of the ANC-led alliance, not least because it seeks to build and draw on a mass movement in order to win social and economic change.

Numsa's decision can be seen as a political consequence of the Marikana massacre of August 16 2012 and the shockingly tame response to it. How could such an event, entailing a deliberate act of violence by security forces, targeted at a (supposed) constituency of the ruling alliance in the key mining sector not affect the status quo? We still do not know who ordered the use of live ammunition. Last year, at a lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand, former Planning Minister Trevor Manuel was prepared to discuss what he saw as the long-term proximate causes of Marikana, yet say nothing about the immediate responsibility for the massacre, and to advocate continuity in policies that have failed workers.

Numsa has confronted the elephant in the room: mine workers' anger towards the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), once Cosatu's largest affiliate. It testifies to a decision to break with the past that is anchored in a will to honour the victims of Marikana. At its congress, Numsa raised more than R350,000 for the families of those who were killed, who have been largely abandoned, having to fight even for fees for legal representation at the commission of inquiry investigating the massacre. This puts Numsa in stark contrast to the ANC's Cyril Ramaphosa, a former NUM general secretary and a strategic shareholder in Lonmin, who called the Marikana strikers "dastardly criminal" and who demanded "concomitant action" be taken against them; Ramaphosa has now been appointed as the country's Deputy-President.

Numsa's decision entails recognising that the ANC government defends the interests of big business and finance, as well as of a few of its own selected "partners" to established capital, at the expense of the working class, which includes the unemployed and the precariously employed. The official rhetoric is, of course, different, including the increasingly ludicrous reference to a "second stage" of the national democratic revolution. Instead, what South Africa has experienced since 1994 is closer to a national neoliberal revolution, with the control of policy in the hands of the National Treasury in the name of "business friendliness".

The control of much black economic empowerment (BEE) funding by large private companies has led to many jobs being outsourced to "micro-entrepreneurs", who are asked to perform the same task but without permanent employment and its associated benefits. Well-paid consultants are then brought in to help them acquire the "business skills" they lack. This has exacerbated an economy-wide trend towards labour casualization in a context of high unemployment (close to 40%), further undermining the position of organized labour. It is therefore remarkable that NUMSA has taken the lead of a response to neoliberalism which holds both promises, and challenges.

Two moves are thus promising. First is Numsa's intention not to rush into electoral politics but to form alliances with progressive forces, whether political, union or social movements, with a view to building a 'United front' against neoliberalism. Social movements have been relentlessly attacked by the state, and their inclusion in a broad movement promises that key questions — from housing to

water and electricity distribution — will receive more attention. Second is Numsa's statement about organising across value chains, including its announcement that it will organise mine workers. Moreover, Numsa shows signs of serious engagement with economic policy issues and willingness to mobilise labour in support of progressive economic policy objectives.

While there is much to commend about Numsa's decision, it would be foolish to imagine that it will succeed easily. The building of such an ambitious project will face huge challenges. The most immediate one is the difficulties the union is bound to experience when it integrates large numbers of mine workers. Building new alliances on the left will in all likelihood entail difficulties along organizational as well as ideological lines. And last but not least, the reaction of the alliance will be harsh, with great effort made to isolate Numsa. This is intensified for the ANC because there is much to lose with political power for a movement that presides over avenues of accumulation intertwined with the circuits of the state.