

Article for the Sunday independent, by Zwelinzima Vavi

On May Day 2015, for the first time since the birth of COSATU in 1985, comrades who have struggled together under the banner of COSATU were marching separately, on the very day which is supposed to celebrate workers' unity and solidarity.

Such disunity can be good news only for the wealthy capitalist elite who know that workers divided can always be defeated, and then be forced to work for even lower wages and in worse conditions, so that their profits can soar to even higher levels, while they get even richer through the exploitation of workers.

Still worse, this division comes when workers face a huge crisis within both the country and the workers' movement. South Africa has the eighth highest levels of unemployment in the world, at over 34%; more than 54% of South Africans are living in poverty and we are world leaders in inequality. Casualisation and super-exploitation by labour brokers continue unabated, despite new laws supposed to restrict it.

Big business and their allies in parliament are looking at new ways to further intensify the exploitation of workers, end collective bargaining, restrict the right to strike though compulsory arbitration and resist 'unrealistic' demands for higher wages.

Government is still pushing ahead with the anti-worker National Development Plan and dragging its feet on important reforms like the national health insurance scheme and comprehensive social security.

None of this is unique to South Africa but reflects the changing nature of capitalism. Lenin, in his "Imperialism, the highest form of capitalism" long ago saw the replacement of the individual capitalist by monopolies and imperialist domination of the world economy. Today even the directors of global companies are being replaced as key decisions are taken by a network of international financial institutions, fund managers and investment brokers, who can invest or disinvest vast amounts of capital at the touch of a keyboard, purely to ensure the maximum return on their clients' investments, with no thought for the social or employment consequences of these decisions.

There is no democratic control of these bodies, and the system is policed by equally unaccountable credit ratings agencies, who blackmail companies whose policies they do not like, like Eskom recently, by down-grading their credit rating, or even just threatening to do so.

Even worse they can blackmail democratic governments with down-gradings even when they are implementing the policies on which they were elected.

A good example is the current negotiations on public service wages and conditions. After six months of negotiations on the workers' demands, *Business Day* (24 April 2015) warns its readers that "the rating agencies are paying close attention to SA's public-sector wage round, and they have made it clear that if the government and the

trade unions settle on a figure that will bust the budget and derail the fiscal consolidation that Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene has promised, a ratings downgrade could follow.”

“Government” in this context means the Treasury, which has become the transmission belt for credit ratings agencies and the interests of monopoly capitalism. It is forcing not only labour and business to toe the line, but is also sabotaging other ministers who are trying to implement government policies. Trade and Industry and Economic Development are trying to direct business to comply with local acquisition policies and to reduce the high levels of price-fixing by monopolies. Education and Health are struggling to improve the appalling level of service and to implement ANC and government policies for a National Health Insurance Scheme.

Yet all such policies are constantly being undermined by Treasury and government has incorporated the its free-market, liberal policies into its National Development Plan and moved further and further from the ANC’s radical policies adopted in Polokwane.

That is why we so desperately need a strong, united workers’ movement to fight back and get the national democratic revolution back on track. But that is also why so many workers are asking why we have the opposite – a trade union movement which is getting weaker, more fragmented, paralysed and toothless.

Recent events in COSATU - the expulsion of NUMSA with its now 365 000 members and its replacement by a shelf union called LIMUSA, the denial of the third of COSATU unions who have in line with the COSATU constitution petitioned for a special congress two years ago and the illegal and groundless dismissal of the General Secretary - can help to answer this question. Many of the arguments used were nothing but personal abuse, groundless allegations and pedantic procedural nit-picking.

But there was one serious political argument which was a thread running through the entire process, which can be seen in other countries’ experiences as well - a concerted attempt to drive out elements in the workers’ leadership who were seen to be ‘anti-majoritarian’, too critical of government and undermining the political credentials of a democratically elected government. It was an argument for turning the 2.2 million strong workers federation into the labour desk of the ruling ANC.

It is a strategy used in many former colonies, where the labour movement fought side-by-side with the people as a whole to drive out the imperialist powers, or, in our case, the colonialism of special type in the form of apartheid capitalism. And it was the massed ranks of the working class, led by COSATU, who played the decisive role in the transition to democracy in 1994.

Frantz Fanon observed “the shocking behaviour of the (post-independence) national bourgeoisie”, whose “mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation but

rather consists of being the transmission line between the nation and capitalism, rampant though camouflaged.”

He could well have been talking about the South African Treasury!

In many countries one of the priorities of this post-colonial bourgeoisie has been to disarm the organised working-class forces who put them in power. The hollowing out, domestication and blunting of trade unions has become a norm in our entire region. The tragedy and nightmare we are going through in South Africa is exactly what workers experienced in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Mozambique and most parts of the African countries.

The most common strategy was to buy off the leadership and absorb them into the new capitalist elite, with offers of seats in parliament, government positions, ambassadorships or directorships of state-owned enterprises and thus leave the trade unions leaderless.

While I have never argued that no union leader or official should ever accept such offers, it must never be at the expense of the effectiveness of the trade unions they are leaving. In the case of COSATU, the lost leaders were replaced by new ones who continued the workers’ struggle, and the federation remained strong, united and militant for many years.

This was clearly a problem for the new elite. As the 2014 elections loomed, there was the usual long list of COSATU leaders seeking elevation to Parliament or provincial legislatures, and several went on to become ministers and portfolio committee chairpersons. Yet the federation gave no sign that it was going to moderate its policies or demands.

On the contrary the huge crisis of unemployment, poverty and inequality, casualisation, labour brokers and e-tolls was making workers more militant, as we saw in the strikes of mine and farm workers, just when the Treasury was wanting to clamp down on ‘excessive’ pay increases.

So a scheme was hatched to ‘hollow out’ COSATU by getting rid of its most militant affiliate NUMSA and its General Secretary, a scheme scandalously orchestrated by the SA ‘Communist’ Party, in cahoots with the most right-wing sections of the ANC. They ultimately succeeded but at an incalculable cost – a split, paralysis and a rump of weak, compliant office bearers.

But although there was little to celebrate this May Day, I was heartened by the emergence on the streets of hundreds of workers who have rejected the witch-hunt and are seeking to rebuild a COSATU which will reclaim its militant, revolutionary heritage, and I shall continue to march with them, and never desert the struggle for workers’ rights and a socialist world.

