

# The South African Communist Party:



preparing for  
a new era?

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In December the SACP held its first legal congress inside the country. KARL VON HOLDT reports.

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The leadership of the SA Communist Party had reason to be pleased with the results of the 8th Party Congress, held inside the country.

The unbanning of the SACP in February 1990, and the rapid events since then, had left the party floundering. It lacked a clear leadership, structures and policy. The previous party congress, held when the party was banned and operating underground, had taken place in Cuba in 1989.

The 8th Congress was a crucial forum for reconstituting the SACP and finding direction. As one party leader saw it, the congress had two key tasks - to consolidate the SACP as an open working class party, and to

identify key areas of debate for the next few years. In short, it had to lay the basis for a new era in the SACP's existence.

The congress gave the party an organisational boost. A relatively young, talented leadership, with a range of mass, labour and underground experience, was elected to the Central Committee. The election of Chris Hani as new general secretary was a major scoop. Hani, a key figure in the ANC's armed wing, is one of the most popular figures in the ANC.

## Growth

The party was able to report an enormous growth in membership - from 5 000 in

January to 21 000 in November. Three hundred branches have been launched, with a further 100 to be launched soon. Seventy five percent of the 400 delegates were workers or unemployed. Many are active unionists. Delegates debated and adopted a new democratic constitution, a manifesto and resolutions.

The congress was well organised, and all plenaries were open to the press - a first for progressive organisations in SA, and a sign that the party is serious about democracy. Plenary debate was open and democratic.

SACP leaders were clearly quite delighted by the successes of the congress. But many socialists in the

party, the trade unions and beyond, were disappointed. Internationally, the congress took place in the context of the collapse of communism and profound crisis of socialism. In SA the working class faces new, complex and immensely challenging tasks of transition to democracy. Yet the congress did not rise to the ideological or political challenges posed by the crisis. And it failed to define a clear strategy for the SACP or the left in SA.

Thus, while the congress succeeded in establishing the SACP as an open working class organisation, it failed to identify the key areas for analysis and debate.

However, one should be cautious about assessing the congress and the manifesto it adopted. They represent moments in the life of a rapidly changing party. One thing is evident. There is a new culture of openness and debate within the party. Many activists are raising doubts and grappling with new questions. This could lead to future surprises.

### Orthodox communist ideology

Outgoing party general secretary Joe Slovo made an appeal for bold questioning and for an opening up of the party in his political report to the congress. He argued for the term 'democratic socialism'. He replaced the traditional references to 'Marxism-Leninism' with simple 'Marxism'. He appealed for party members to approach



*New general-secretary  
Chris Hani*

*Photo: Kentridge Mathabathe/  
New Nation*

the ideas of non-party socialists, and even non-socialists, with open minds, and called for critical thinking: "If the experience of revolutionary practice has put in question the validity of some of the original formulations, we must have the courage to examine them. It is un-Marxist to replace thought with dogma."

Slovo also argued for a liberalisation of party discipline. Arguing that "most majority ideas start their life as minority ideas", he said that "to act without tolerance towards minority ideas is to paralyse the development of knowledge". He rejected the idea of organised tendencies, but felt minorities should be able to put forward platforms for debate prior to party conferences. Individuals who disagree with party policy should not be compelled to support these policies in public, he said.

Similar positions were expressed in the draft manifesto and draft constitution, pre-

pared by the party leadership before the congress. However, most of these positions were rejected by congress. 'Democratic socialism' was rejected in favour of simple 'socialism'; 'Marxism-Leninism' was reinstated in all party documents; and there was a leaning towards a tighter, disciplined vanguard style of organisation.

'Democratic socialism' was rejected on the grounds that socialism is intrinsically democratic. With this move, delegates rejected the need for a serious assessment of socialist theory and practice. Delegates argued that 'democratic socialism' sounds unnecessarily defensive, and were clearly suspicious that it might indicate a move towards social democracy.

Although it is used extensively, the term 'vanguard' is not defined in party documents. But in the context of the rejection of minority platforms, and the reinstatement of Marxism-Leninism, it suggests the retention of an ideologically homogenous, tightly organised party which is regarded as "more advanced" than other organisations, such as trade unions.

The manifesto steers clear of any serious analysis of the collapse of communism, or any self-analysis of the historical relation of the SACP to communism. There is no hint that the crisis of socialism could be more than an organisational and political defeat - that it might have profound theoretical and

strategic dimensions as well.

Some delegates did raise these questions. A member of the Western Cape delegation, for example, made an impassioned plea to confront the real issues: "The socialism that failed is the socialism that we supported and knew as socialism for years. We cannot simply dismiss the problem by calling it 'distorted socialism'.

Those societies achieved things like full employment, free health care, and so on - those were not distortions, they are real features of socialism. So the issues and problems are much deeper. We need to define what kind of socialism we want for South Africa."

However, the majority constantly denied the crisis by arguing that it is not socialism which failed, but its implementation. "It is not the tool that is at fault, but the workman," they argued, relying on an unfortunate metaphor used by Slovo. Most delegates clearly felt more comfortable with the certainties of communist dogma, than with bold, creative and critical debate.

### **The current situation**

However, the congress took a much more creative approach to analysing the current transition to democracy in SA. The manifesto sees negotiations opening up a long period of democratic struggle: "The immediate issue under negotiation - a new democratic constitution and non-racial elections -

must open up, not close down, a process of ongoing political, economic and social empowerment of the working masses of our country."

While "social democratic pacts between organised labour and capital" might be immediately on the agenda because of the present balance of forces, in the long run this would simply stabilise capitalism and leave democratisation "incomplete and thoroughly blocked". The SACP foresees a mixed economy in which the working class can make both immediate gains and "lay the basis for a future socialist SA".

The manifesto suggests that the working class should develop a new growth strategy, raise productivity, and support a more competitive export industry. Workers should take the initiative in order to defend their and the broader national interests against the narrow interests of the bosses. "The active involvement by workers in macro-economic bargaining must become part of a process in which the working class, more and more, takes the lead in shaping national economic policy and in defining the national interest."

The working class should also take the lead in influencing the pattern of international economic alliances which SA enters into, and the SACP intends becoming active in "revitalising a movement of the South" to change the rules of the world

economy.

The manifesto also argues for "the development of a vast network of democratic organs of popular participation in both the economy and the political system under the leadership of the working class." It is the "development of these institutions of popular democracy to a position of dominance in all spheres - political, economic, social and cultural - which constitutes the core of the social system for which we are struggling."

### **Orthodox ideology, innovative strategy**

The strategic perspective outlined above is highly innovative. The idea that the working class in a capitalist society can engage in a struggle to shape national economic policy rests to some extent on the experiences of social democracy, as well as attempts to extend social democracy in a more radical direction (see also box on p 56). Such strategies are increasingly being discussed in labour movements and left parties (for example, the Workers Party in Brazil). While it is a perspective rich with possibilities, it is entirely foreign to Marxism-Leninism.

The manifesto contains the outlines for a democratic struggle for socialism. Marxism-Leninism, on the other hand, quite simply does not have the concepts to guide such a struggle. Leninism lacks a theory of social change or civil society, has a

statist concept of political power, and a completely inadequate concept of democracy. The Leninist vanguard political party has no prospect of winning social hegemony or electoral victory for the working class.

There is thus a profound contradiction in the manifesto adopted at the congress. On the one hand it entrenches orthodox communist ideological positions. On the other, it suggests a new and innovative strategy of democratic struggle for socialism. This contradiction reveals some of the tensions within the party as it grapples with its future.

### **The role of the party**

Before the congress many members of the party were demoralised, feeling that the party was regarded as a junior partner in the ANC-SACP-COSATU alliance, and that it had no clear role. Some in the unions questioned whether the party should exist at all.

The overlapping leadership and membership of the ANC and SACP has paralysed the party, robbing it of its most capable activists and denying it a clear independent role. Many of the party's best activists occupy leadership positions in the ANC. Yet they find it difficult to put forward a party position in the ANC, let alone open a socialist debate, because this would be seen as a party caucus and could generate an anti-communist backlash.

Similarly, the SACP finds it impossible to put forward a clear criticism of the ANC, or to analyse the different currents and forces within the ANC - because this again could unleash an anti-communist backlash and accusations of divided loyalty. The party argues that socialists should build the ANC, but cannot put forward an effective programme for how they should do this and what policies they should push the ANC to adopt.

This situation makes it difficult for socialists to discuss the way forward. For example, there are different views about the ANC among socialists in the trade unions - and in the party. Some believe that the 'working class bias' of the ANC is rhetorical, that the middle-classes and a new elite are rapidly consolidating their position in the ANC, aided by the sorts of compromises imposed on the ANC by objective conditions.

In this view, any attempt to build a working class orientation in the ANC will be marginalised. While this view recognises that currently the ANC is the key political force in the democratic camp, and that the left should actively bolster its strength and influence its strategy, it feels that a working class party, such as the SACP, should be the focus of building a socialist project.

Others believe the struggle for an ANC with a strong working class bias is far from over, and that it is

crucial to build a socialist presence and debate within the ANC itself. In this view building the SACP is secondary, and perhaps merely a distraction from the main task.

This is an extremely difficult dilemma, one with deep historical roots. Perhaps it is not possible to arrive at clear answers at this stage, but the debate must be started. Until it is resolved, the party will find it difficult to define a role for itself. But the congress made no attempt to discuss it. It simply reaffirmed the alliance and the role of communists inside the ANC, at the same time asserting the need to establish a more independent profile for the party.

### **Campaigns**

Many activists feel that the key to building the party's profile is to launch party campaigns. The congress decided to launch two - one against hunger, homelessness, and lack of health care, and one for solidarity with Cuba. But the problem of the party's role will not be resolved simply by launching campaigns.

The campaign against poverty, for example, seems to lack focus. If the anti-VAT campaign showed anything, it was that a mass campaign must have clear demands, clear opponents and clear intentions. What would the intention of the SACP campaign be - to put pressure on the ANC? To bring demands to CODESA - which is not dealing with these issues? To

impact on the national economic negotiations - which are being driven by COSATU?

These questions point once again to the fundamental strategic dilemma facing the SACP: what is its independent role? What has it to offer which is not offered by the ANC or COSATU? This dilemma is sharpened when one realises that the most innovative element in the new manifesto - the discussion of the mixed economy and strategies to empower the working class - is virtually a carbon copy of strategies and policies developing within COSATU. COSATU is the major working class organisation with the capacity and resources both to mount mass struggle and to develop political and economic policy. What does this mean for the 'vanguard' role of the SACP?

### The significance of the congress

At the level of ideology, the congress rejected the innovating positions of Slovo, Cronin and others, and reasserted the communist orthodoxy of the SACP. How significant is this? Is this a serious defeat for the innovating trend led by Joe Slovo? What are the prospects of bold new socialist thinking in the party?

The key innovators were re-elected to the central committee - Slovo unanimously as chairperson, Cronin with the highest number of votes. Hani supported the term 'democratic socialism'.



8th Congress - a fluid moment in the life of the SACP

Photo: Kentridge Mathabathe/New Nation

Slovo himself told a press conference that he did not see the result as a defeat for his views. On the contrary, delegates accepted the content of 'democratic socialism' (multi-party democracy, civil liberties) while rejecting the term; perhaps, he said, this was simply a defensive gesture.

Yet surely this defensiveness is highly significant. The majority of party activists have been schooled in orthodox communism. They easily responded to a core of hardline Marxist-Leninists, rejecting the questioning and more open-ended approach advocated by Slovo and others. The majority of delegates chose to cling to the dogmas of the past, and hope that these will carry them safely through the crisis. Perhaps one could not expect more from a party so burdened with a history of orthodox communism.

Yet there are many party activists who are trying to

grapple with the new questions. There is a new thirst for analysis and debate. Although neither the congress itself nor the manifesto adequately confronted the key questions, these are likely to emerge in party discussions and publications in the future.

### Key issues facing the party

In my view, the party faces the following burning questions. If it is unable to lead debate on these issues it is unlikely to develop as a socialist force.

- What limits and possibilities are open for the ANC, and what is the role of the left in the ANC?
- What should the relationship be between a socialist party and the labour movement?
- Under conditions of multi-party democracy, how can socialists win a parliamentary majority? How can they use parliamentary power to transform society?

- What is the relation between building 'organs of popular power' and parliamentary politics?
- Can social-democratic type reforms lay the basis for socialism?
- What is 'democratic socialism'? What is a democratic socialist economy, and how can market and plan be integrated?

These questions require debate over strategy. They also require a theoretical critique of Marxism-Leninism, and a conceptual debate about civil society, power, the state, hegemony and social change.

### The SACP - reviving socialism, or stifling it?

This is a fluid moment in the life of the SACP. The ideological positions adopted at the congress reflect the fact that there are a large number of hardline orthodox communists in the party, and the fact that most activists have been schooled in communist dogma. On the other hand, there is an unprecedented air of open debate and questioning. The innovators in the party leadership have been elected with enthusiastic support, even when their views were rejected. There is a strong presence of unionists in the party at all levels, and while this does not necessarily mean ideological renewal, it does introduce a culture of debate and organisational democracy.

The contradictions in the party's manifesto - and the contradiction between the

## New SACP leadership

### National officers

#### General Secretary:

Chris Hani (ANC NEC)

#### National Chairperson:

Joe Slovo (ANC NEC)

#### Deputy General Secretary:

Charles Nqakula

#### Deputy National Chairperson:

Raymond Mhlaba

#### Treasurer:

Kay Moonsamy

### Central committee

#### (25 members)

Jeremy Cronin (ANC NEC)	407
Ronnie Kasrils (ANC NEC)	400
Chris Dlamini (COSATU)	392
Sydney Mufamadi (ANC NEC)	387
John Gomomo (COSATU)	385
John Nkadimeng (ANC NEC)	365
Billy Nair (ANC NEC)	361
Moses Mayekiso (COSATU)	350
Blade Nzimande	339
Harry Gwala	332
Sizakele Sigxashe	329
Essop Pahad	329
Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi	324
Raymond Suttner (ANC NEC)	321
Jenny Schreiner	291
Sam Shilowa (COSATU)	285
Tony Yengeni	283
January Masilela	276
Garth Strachan	267
Thenjiwe Mthintso	266
Stan Nkosi	258
Brian Bunting	258
Govan Mbeki (ANC NEC)	252
Matthew Makhalima	251
Nozizwe Madlala	248

[Figures show number of votes]

party's vitality and its dogmatism - are rooted in the history of the South African struggle. On the one hand there is a rich culture of mass

struggle and debate, rooted in the UDF and the labour movement, with an enormous range of tactical and strategic experience.

On the other hand, there is a strong tradition of orthodox communist dogma, which is like a straitjacket on critical thinking. This tradition carries with it a deeply-rooted culture of undemocratic practice and intolerance. There is a real danger that this tradition could prevent the party from catching up with history and debating the burning questions.

If the party is unable to cast aside this straitjacket and renew itself, it will have to face a tough question posed by many of its socialist critics both inside the labour movement and outside it, and both inside the party and outside it. That question is: has the party become an obstacle to the re-grouping of the left and the forging of a new socialist vision and strategy?

It is too early to judge this question. The next two or three years will show whether the vitality of the struggle or its dogmatism will dominate the SACP. Hopefully, the party will show itself able to forge a new role and contribute towards creative, bold socialist thought and practice.

If it does not, the most creative activists are likely to drift away from the party, and it will become increasingly marginal to political developments in South Africa. ☆