

Debate

Taking the Alliance Seriously: Replying to Habib and Taylor

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Habib and Taylor's response to our arguments in favour of COSATU remaining within the Tripartite Alliance was more eloquent than enlightening. But if our exchange with them has served to stake out the positions in what is probably going to become an enduring debate, then it will have served some useful purpose. For the moment, it would seem that we are going to have to agree to disagree. None the less, in what will be our parting shot (for the moment, at least), we want to offer some final observations which follow from Habib and Taylor's alarming failure to refer to the burgeoning comparative literature on trade unions and politics. Let us look at some of the specific issues they raise from this wider perspective.

Firstly, there is the question as to the benefits of the tripartite alliance. The contemporary literature on trade union growth and decline is voluminous, but one of the central arguments is whether the pressures unions have to contend with in the late 1990s are primarily the result of *state policies* or *global economic forces*. Our reading is that there seems to be something of a consensus building around the greater weight of the latter (see, for instance, Godard 1997, Kelly 1997). In brutal sum, it would seem that the pressures associated with globalization can be ameliorated, but not eliminated by national institutions. Delinking from the world economy (Amin 1990) is simply not a serious option in the late 1990s. Given the interconnected nature of the world system – and the overwhelming predominance of the Western powers – individual national governments have little choice but to follow certain broad macroeconomic strategies, certainly in the short and medium terms (Gill and Law 1988:68).

However, the outlook is not as depressing as may first seem. As noted earlier, national institutions may ameliorate or exacerbate the pressures

facing unions (Godard 1997:400). In those cases where countries have had more sympathetic governments – such as Germany and Sweden – unions have fared considerably better than in instances where the government has been unremittingly hostile to the labour movement (Kelly 1997). And, whatever Habib and Taylor say, the South African government is indeed sympathetic. The LRA does protect worker and union rights, guaranteeing representative unions the automatic right to recognition. Moreover, the LRA has been buttressed by recent Labour Court decisions (inter alia, strengthening the right to strike), the Employment Equity Act, and the Health and Safety Act. Certainly, we agree with Habib and Taylor that some deregulation is taking place, and we accept that there have been cautious moves towards a legal recognition of a dualistic labour market within South Africa. However, the legal protection enjoyed by South African labour unions is still considerably more comprehensive than that accorded to their counterparts in the United States, Britain, let alone countries like New Zealand where all reference to trade unions has been deleted from labour legislation. Thus although the ANC is unable and, indeed, unwilling to completely protect unions from an adverse global environment, a legislative base does exist for vigorous unions to look after themselves (cf Hyman 1992).

Mobilization theory suggests that those unions which are best equipped to cope are those which play a social movement role (Kelly 1997). This does not necessarily mean that they should always form a mass-based opposition to an unjust regime (such as played by COSATU in the 1980s). Rather it implies that trade unions should constitute a key component of a popular constituency that is committed to achieving improved material conditions for workers within the context of other, sometimes contradictory, struggles. In other words, a social movement based on trade union identity requires the making of a range of often awkward strategic choices, such as forming alliances with other groupings, which will invariably involve some trade off between influence and autonomy, and between pain and gain (Valenzuela 1992:60-63).

As it is, Habib and Taylor are coming very close to suggesting that with the Mass Democratic Movement having disposed of one enemy in the form of the National Party, it is now time to mobilise for the ousting of the ANC. Or are we being unfair to them? Are they just saying that instead of a new opposition providing the base for an alternative government, they are only arguing for the need for mobilising a new opposition movement just to shift

the government's economic strategy back towards the RDP? If the latter, then, quite simply, they have failed to argue a convincing case as to why popular mobilisation outside the ranks of the Alliance would be more effective than it would if COSATU would dedicate itself to campaigning more effectively from within. Their suggestion that ANC has been captured by capital is only part of the reality, for the ANC simultaneously remains the principal political embodiment of popular struggles for political, economic and social justice. It can only slough off this complicated heritage if it is allowed to by its popular base. Habib and Taylor seem simplistically determined to push it on its way, as if the very contradictions of the ANC do not open it up to a variety of alternative futures: as a dominant party overwhelmingly reflective of the interests of capital, as a dominant party responsive to and reconciling pressures from a diversity of social forces, or indeed, as a dominant party which is committed to social democracy. Unfortunately, the last of these alternatives is not utopian, but it is none the less a goal that is worth struggling for.

On another front, we were very disappointed to see Habib and Taylor trot out the tired horse of non-delivery, so beloved of right wing columnists in the South African press, who retail in fears of a black rabble whose insatiable demands threaten to derail the economy. In contrast, over 81 per cent of respondents to the 1998 worker survey claimed that there had been visible delivery in the area of electrification, 53 per cent felt that there had been an improvement in their diet, 76 per cent in terms of delivery of telephones, and 81 per cent in the provision of water. All these areas are basic quality of life issues more visible to ordinary workers than to armchair theorists. Worker perceptions are not, as Habib and Taylor allege 'lagging behind material realities' so much as reflecting it. In short, four years of ANC rule have yielded both legal and material benefits. This is not to suggest that workers are ardent supporters of GEAR, for as Habib and Taylor indicate, many of them are highly critical of it. But rather than indicating that workers feel totally betrayed by the abandonment of the RDP, it implies to us that workers have a surprisingly sophisticated view of the developmental dilemmas facing the government. Habib and Taylor go on to cite the finding that 37 per cent of our respondents would vote for another party at a further election if by that time the ANC had not delivered adequate material rewards, and they further suggest that in reality, the figure might be higher than this because the 1998 survey under-represents unskilled workers (18.3 per cent compared to 30.3 per cent in the 1998

survey). Thus, they argue, the popular basis for a new opposition party is there. But our view is that they build their hopes too high upon this particular finding.

First of all, it is not a foregone conclusion that members of the growing segment of the labour market – the informally employed or unemployed – would necessarily support a party which might well be viewed as the political vehicle of a relatively privileged stratum of employed (and increasingly skilled) (Wood 1996) trade unionists.

Secondly, we stand by our assertion that Habib and Taylor underestimate the practical difficulties of establishing an electoral alternative. Indeed, the dismal performance of ultra-left political parties in the June 1999 elections would underscore our point. Yes, the unions do have significant financial resources at their disposal. However, this is usually in the form of union-administered pension funds and the like which should not be used to bankroll political adventures. Any visit to a trade union office confirms that the independent union movement is in little position to spend R100 to R150 million to bankroll a high profile election campaign.

Habib and Taylor also make much of the fact that a large proportion of workers are organized in non-COSATU federations and that the latter are by no means reactionary. Sadly, however, a large proportion of non-COSATU unions are, indeed, decidedly unlikely to join a social-movement party based upon a progressive, political agenda. Even the nominally Africanist National Congress of Trade Unions has extremely conservative affiliates such as the Black Trade Union of Transnet (Blatu). Whilst several unions affiliated to the Federation of Unions of South Africa have begun to experiment with more progressive organizational methods, their internal culture remains a far cry from that of their COSATU counterparts. Furthermore, the 1990s have not been easy for non-COSATU unions, many of which have experienced a serious loss of members (Sikweba 1997).

We do not doubt that South Africa continues to be riven by class conflict and that there is a vital need to ensure that the new democracy seriously responds to the needs of the working class and the poor. But Habib and Taylor are resorting to the crudest of simplicities to suggest that class struggles can only be fought out between rather than within political parties. And if they think that we are attempting to suppress critical thought, then they simply haven't read our original article properly. Indeed, it is a great pity that they choose to conclude their exchange on a note of injured paranoia.

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