

South African Federation of Trade Unions

12 July 2017

Dr Blade Nzimande
General Secretary
South African Communist Party Braamfontein

Dear Comrade General Secretary,

Why we are unable to honour the invitation to your Congress

Thank you for the invitation to your elective 14th National Congress, which we have carefully considered.

As the second largest and fastest growing trade union federation in the country, and one with an unambiguous socialist orientation, it would be entirely proper for a Communist Party to invite SAFTU to its Congress. However we are unable to accept your invitation for a number of reasons including the following:

Reflection is a revolutionary process

Firstly, it would appear that the SACP leadership has been unable to seriously reflect on the consequences of their decision to actively support the destruction of the unity of the trade union movement.

By openly supporting the expulsion of over 340,000 metal workers, and then to stand idly by when hundreds of other unions members within COSATU were summarily expelled for demanding an end to corruption, financial and political accountability and transparency by their union leaderships makes us doubt that any serious reflection has taken place.

We have yet to hear the profound voice of a genuine Communist Party speaking out against the 'business unionism' of corrupt leadership within CEPPWAWU, SATAWU, SAMWU, etc.

It was clear at the time that the unity of the working class was of paramount importance if a challenge to austerity and capitalist rule were to be taken seriously. Workers have been under siege from the capitalist class and neoliberal programmes implemented by the government, from the genesis of GEAR right through to the NDP.

To weaken trade unions further at the time when no effort should have been spared to unite workers is an unforgivable act of treason. These anti-worker acts alone, we must say, have seriously undermined the credibility of the SACP leadership both locally and internationally.

Frankly SAFTU unions are simply disbelieving and skeptical about the motives of the SACP leadership. An organisation that has recently and consciously acted to destroy workers' unity simply cannot be trusted to act differently and do the same again, if the leadership were to believe the need arose to address what the SACP referred to as a "lingering irritation".

Looking in the mirror

Secondly, it would appear that the leadership of the SACP have been unable to 'look in the mirror' and learn the lessons from the past, and especially the constraints that have been imposed and internalized in order to secure Cabinet posts and other positions inside the belly of a capitalist state driving an anti-worker, anti-working class and pro-business economic agenda.

To witness SACP leaders in the Cabinet acting as spokespersons of those implicated in thieving schemes, and pulling the wool over the eyes of our people to obscure and justify brazen theft in relation to Nkandla was such a betrayal of the role the communists inside the SACP have historically played.

Joining the attacks on the judiciary and the media and going to the extent of proposing insult laws (by actively calling on the South African citizens not to insult Jacob Zuma and therefore calling for legislation to punish anyone who "insults the President") was nothing but a move to muzzle the outrage expressed at the project that was and is still about destroying all the gains of our democracy. Given the evidence, which was widely available indicating that this project was about driving a programme towards a full-blown kleptocracy, this has left many in disbelief.

This programme did not start when the Guptas were gunning for the heads of SACP leaders and other Cabinet members in 2015. It started as soon as Jacob Zuma was elected in May 2009. Those with short memories must recall the disbandment of the crime and corruption busting capacity of the state in the Scorpions, the hollowing out of the intelligence services, the destruction of almost all state capacity, including state-owned enterprises, and more recently the capturing of the Public Protector and much more besides, are the limited examples we raise in this short letter to you.

It is only very recently that the SACP leadership has been bold enough to voice their disappointment with the leadership of the ANC, when it has been painfully obvious to everyone else, as wave after wave of evidence has surfaced making an irrefutable case against Guptisation and state capture. The SACP is a very significant way together with many in the ANC helped Zuma and made him untouchable in the process.

There have been two kinds of state capture in our view. The first was the capturing of the ANC itself in the run-up to the 1994 which resulted in the abandonment of its historic mission to liberate black people in general and Africans in particular, to address the exploitation of the working people and end the triple oppression faced by women in their homes, workplaces and broader society. The Zupta capture is an immediate threat. Left alone the Zupta project will destroy any prospects for a truly united, non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa.

We are in agreement with the SACP on this immediate threat; however those who raised the alarm from 2009 even from 2007 were labeled anti-majoritarian and worse counter-revolutionary by the SACP leadership. SACP members must ask how this was allowed to happen.

The alternative to neo liberalism is not austerity by another name!

Thirdly, the SACP does not appear to have reflected on its own role in justifying and propping up the status quo. We don't believe that you have truly looked at the scale of the destruction caused by neoliberal policies and austerity measures that the SACP has been party to supporting at national, provincial and local level.

Have SACP leaders not asked themselves why hundreds of thousands of poor people in our communities have taken to the streets over the last period, sometimes employing extremely desperate measures, in order to be heard, and to demand that ANC election promises of a better life for all to be honoured?

Have the SACP had an opportunity to look at the destruction of jobs in the manufacturing, agricultural and other sectors, which are being decimated?

Furthermore, we are convinced that the SACP leadership has not assessed ideologically the devastating impact the Zuma and ANC Alliance projects have had on the future prospects of a genuine left project.

The destruction of state-owned enterprises in particular, the hollowing out of the state and organs of people's power have made it harder for left forces to convince and mobilise the public about the efficacy of an active democratic developmental state that could make real change possible through such programmes as the nationalisation of strategic sectors of the economy, and other measures to redistribute wealth and power in our country.

Two factions: different sides of the same coin!

Fourthly the SACP appears to have fallen into the trap of factional politics. Despite the lessons of the past, in particular the devastating decision (which all of us rallied around and must shamefully regret) to rally the working class behind an extremely dangerous and compromised candidate such as Jacob Zuma and his NEC, it is ready to support the leadership of one faction against another by uncritically backing a pro-capital candidate as the next President of our country.

From a distance we see a repeat of history as another coalition of the wounded is put together to challenge a man who has become more and more unpopular.

Surely the lessons of the Zuma period must teach us that a reliance on individuals, despite their rhetoric, has led to a disaster. Without an explicit programme to challenge capitalist rule, linked to the rebuilding of a mass democratic movement to ensure that the programme is implemented, will inevitably lead to further paralysis and worse still deepening levels of poverty, unemployment, inequality and corruption.

Meanwhile, the unending exploitation and misery that huge sections of our population experience today will continue, and blame will be placed at the door of the Alliance which you are determined to preserve regardless. Changing who occupies the Presidency will not change the class balance of forces, or the reality of workers' lives in South Africa today, or restore the electoral fortunes of the ANC.

Despite the fact that we are possibly in the deepest political and economic crisis for decades, the SACP remains unable and unwilling to offer the working class an alternative to that posed by the dysfunctional ANC led Alliance. In our view, Alliance policies at this time consist of little more than an accelerated continuation of the policies of GEAR and other variants of an austerity approach that is crippling the working class locally and globally.

The SACP is as guilty as the Jacob Zuma-led faction in imposing and implementing a neoliberal

programme that is anti-poor, anti-working class, pro-capitalist and anti-socialist. You have to look at the rate of youth and women unemployment and the Esidimeni scandal to understand the full meaning of the crisis.

A question arise, is the SACP by inviting us and sudden talk of putting together a broad front of left formations not an attempt at redeeming itself and worse using us as a bargaining chip in its factional maneuvers inside the ANC led Alliance to sort out the eating queue in 2017 and 2019 instead of addressing the crisis facing the working class and the black majority today?

Unity of the trade union movement

Communist parties around the world have always understood the critical importance of the role trade unions must play as a school for working class consciousness. In fact Lenin defined that role as follows:

“When the workers of a single factory or of a single branch of industry engage in struggle against their employer or employers, is this class struggle? No, this is only a weak embryo of it. The struggle of the workers becomes a class struggle only when all the foremost representatives of the entire working class of the whole country are conscious of themselves as a single working class and launch a struggle that is directed, not against individual employers, but against the entire class of capitalists and against the government that supports that class.

Only when the individual worker realizes that he is a member of the entire working class, only when he recognises the fact that his petty day-to-day struggle against individual employers and individual government officials is a struggle against the entire bourgeoisie and the entire government, does his struggle become a class struggle.” (Vladimir Lenin, On the Foreign Policy of the Soviet State)

The factionalist and sectarian behaviour of the South African Communist Party leadership has today turned the trade union movement in South Africa into a lap dog of capitalism. Look at the state of the once mighty COSATU to appreciate your own contribution to the destruction of the country.

The evidence of this assertion is the fact that the SACP, on the eve of the December 2013 NUMSA Special National Congress, wrote an open letter to NUMSA delegates to disown their national leadership who courageously called for Zuma to be removed. It is now a fact that you rejected these calls in 2013 BUT surfaced this same demand in 2017. Surely a Communist Party worth its salt should be seen to lead and not follow.

Actions speak louder than rhetoric!

Fifthly, despite the fact that the SACP may still enjoy some support in sections of the working class and the poor, it has been impossible to detect any concrete actions to provide solidarity to workers and communities who have engaged in day-to-day struggles. We see no communist party flag in battles for “Outsourcing Must Fall”, “Fees Must Fall” and the 13 000 annual service delivery protests.

Actively supporting our people in struggle against exploitation, corruption and state repression is an essential task for any organisation claiming to be socialist and communist. The building and leading of genuine mass campaigns, to strengthen class-consciousness, and to take forward

explicit demands that challenge the logic of capital is the hallmark of an organisation that is serious about challenging capitalist rule. Instead the SACP has been passive, or when pushed, has tailed organisations that represent wider class interests.

We could discuss these points in greater detail, but what we hope they illustrate is that the actions of the SACP leadership over the last period have been part of the problem, and not part of the solution.

We hope that those honest workers who have thus far continued to support the SACP, in the absence of anything else, will take note, and at the very least ask themselves if the programme of the SACP in the recent past, and at the current time, is capable of taking the class struggle forward. We believe that is decidedly not the case.

Only if, and when, the SACP decisively and publicly breaks with the politics of positioning, patronage and class collaboration will organisations like ours be able to accept an invitation to witness your deliberations. Until that time, we shall continue placing the needs of the working class at the centre of our concerns, for that is the real meaning of non-sectarianism.

Activists on the ground, if listened to, will testify and show evidence to indicate that the working class and the poor are desperately looking for organisations that will represent their interests, and who will also be ready to stand side-by-side with them in actively challenging, not accommodating the dictates of the market. That is what we intend to do.

We will await the outcomes of the SACP Congress to see if such an orientation is capable of emerging. We remain however convinced, unless otherwise proven, that you will remain hanging on to the apron-strings of the African National Congress, who has now proven to be the champion of neo-liberal capitalist policies.

Yours faithfully

Zwelinzima Vavi

General Secretary