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Anarchist/syndicalist and independent Marxist intersections in post-apartheid struggles, South Africa: the WSF/ZACF current in Gauteng, 1990s–2010s

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ABSTRACT

South Africa has a long-established independent left, outside the big traditions of nationalism and Marxism-Leninism. Post-apartheid its fortunes have varied considerably, as space opened up for movements to the left of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party, but opportunities declined as the state increased its legitimacy, penetration of civil society, and systems of patronage. This paper looks at cooperation, competition and convergence on the independent left, with particular reference to independent Marxists (mainly the well-established Trotskyist tradition) and revolutionary anarchists and syndicalists (a movement that revived in the 1990s). These intersections have taken place in study groups, popular education, student struggles, and post-apartheid social movements and unions, and indicate the vitality and fragility of the independent left, and the ongoing importance of cooperation and overlaps, as well as of long-standing divisions over theory and strategy. Particular attention is paid to Keep Left, the Socialist Group, the Democratic Socialist Movement, and the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist Front.

KEYWORDS

South Africa; anarchism; Marxism; the South African left; convergence

The aim of this paper is to explore the record of left convergence in South Africa from the 1990s, with a focus on the ‘independent left’ post-apartheid. By the ‘independent left’, we refer to left traditions outside the dominant nationalist and Marxist-Leninist traditions, exemplified in South Africa by the African National Congress (ANC, founded 1912, today the ruling party) and the South African Communist Party (SACP, founded 1921), respectively, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, founded 1985), which are formally engaged in a Tripartite Alliance.¹ The core of South Africa’s independent left today are Trotskyism, anarchism / syndicalism and ‘autonomism’ (Maisiri, 2014, pp. 9–10). Anarchism / syndicalism was a powerful force from the 1880s to the 1920s, then disappeared, reviving with a second wave in the 1990s. The Trotskyist tradition has existed since the 1920s. In the South African context, ‘autonomism’ refers to a diverse current influenced by Marx, Foucault and Negri. The ‘workerist’ current in the 1980s Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) – distinct from Italian *operaismo* – was of the independent left, but faded away by 1994 (Byrne, 2011).

The independent left has played a significant role in South African history, including inside ANC-linked formations like COSATU, but the limited literature ends its analysis around 1990 (e.g. Drew, 1996; Fine & Davis, 1991; Friedman, 2012; Johnstone, 1979; Mantzaris, 1995; van der Walt, 2007). Detailed analyses of post-1990 Trotskyists are extremely limited – the main exception is Maisiri

(2014) – and material on post-1990 anarchism / syndicalism is patchy (e.g. Maisiri, 2014; Rey, 2018; van der Walt, 2004, 2018). The activities of anarchists, autonomists and Trotskyists from the 1990s have been noted in some studies of post-apartheid struggles and movements, but only in passing (e.g. Buhlungu, 2004; Legassick, 2011; McKinley, 2012). These works focus on the organizational dynamics and social composition of unions, big parties and social movements, with relatively little on the independent left as such.

This paper provides something different: a close consideration of the independent left, including a detailed outline of the anarchists' / syndicalists' praxis in concrete conditions, interactions with other left currents, activities within unions and other movements and struggles, and debates on theory and strategy. It also examines left intersections in student struggles, study groups and popular education workshops. Much of this took place in the 'townships' – racially segregated residential districts (mostly, grim slums), created by successive colonial and apartheid governments, which set up different townships for black Africans, Coloureds and Indians. 'Coloured' in southern Africa refers to people of mixed, black African, Khoesan, European and/ or slave descent, mostly working-class and poor, generally Afrikaans-speaking. While more affluent township families have moved into historically white suburbs with the end of legal segregation, the township system remains in place as a mass reservoir of cheap labour and national and social oppression.

We also critically engage the emerging literature on 'left convergence'. This has three main thrusts. We agree with the first thrust, that an over-emphasis on historic divisions – such as those between Marxists and anarchists – can be misleading, as it ignores histories of parallels, overlaps and cooperation (Kinna & Prichard, 2012; Prichard & Worth, 2016, p. 4). There is, for example, no doubt that much of the independent left in South Africa, Marxist and anarchist alike, is – formally – committed to a council-based working-class democracy, whatever other differences exist (see e.g. Maisiri, 2014).

We find the other claims of the 'left convergence' literature less convincing in the South African context, but also more widely. Its second thrust is that there is a growing, global 'left convergence' that renders older divisions irrelevant, outdated or purist. If, the argument goes, there are today social movements that draw upon both anarchism and Marxism, and if mass Marxist parties have crumbled with the Soviet Union, we are in a new period. This leads into the third thrust: the argument that a fuller reconciliation on the left is now not just 'a possibility but, one might suggest, a necessity' (Prichard & Worth, 2016, p. 4). But left convergences are not new, and never made differences redundant; nor are they self-evidently positive or necessary. If we include anti-colonial nationalism in the left, South Africa's Tripartite Alliance is a key example of larger 'left convergence' between nationalists and Communists across the former colonial world. The Alliance is wracked with conflict, arguably damages COSATU and SACP (see below), and – like most nationalist/ Communist convergence – involves Communists sacrificing principles.

On the other hand, the old divides remain very much in evidence. While anarchists played an important role in, for example, the Western anti-globalization movement, and the Occupy movement, the major left force emerging from recent struggles against neo-liberalism has been a revived social democracy, including Corbynism in Britain's Labour Party, Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. Latin America's 'pink tide' centred on populists (Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela), a nominally social-democratic Workers Party (Brazil), and mixes of the two (Argentina). Mass Marxist parties remain widespread, including SACP. Certainly, there are many influences on current anti-austerity and anti-capitalist movements, but this, too, is not new: there were radical left currents within most nationalist, Marxist-Leninist and labour parties, like the Marxist Workers Tendency (MWT, formed 1979) Trotskyists within ANC (Friedman, 2012), or its sister body, Militant Tendency within Britain's Labour Party.

As for the argument for a fuller merger: our case study discusses many positive examples of constructive co-operation between distinct left currents in South Africa, but also demonstrates that a more thorough-going fusion is neither practical nor necessary. The differences between political traditions – the anti-apartheid nationalist and the Marxist-Leninist traditions, and the independent left, and within the independent left itself – are significant and valuable. These differences are not mere matters of dogmatism, misunderstanding or sectarianism, nor relevant only to a fading past, but rooted in deep divergences in principles, theory and strategy that cannot, and should not, be wished away.

Every effort should be made to develop amicable relations between left currents, and develop a culture of honest debate, pluralism and tolerance in the movements of the popular, oppressed classes i.e. the working class, peasants, and poor. This prefigures an open, genuinely democratic socialist society, and challenges the dominant statist and authoritarian political traditions. Recognizing and appreciating differences and fostering honest, constructive debate – in place of bureaucratic approaches, manipulation, sectarianism and intolerance – is vital to theoretical development and strategic innovation, the ‘best antidote to being dogmatic’ (McGregor, 2018b).

The new Southern African Platformist tradition

South Africa has one of the only active anarchist movements in southern Africa – certainly the largest in the region – but nonetheless, a small one. The most important current in the anarchism reborn from the early 1990s is ‘Platformism’. This current has been the most active in popular and black working-class struggles, and the only anarchist current that has been both consistently published (from 1993) and continuously organized (from 1995). It has a significant, continuous history of engaging in popular movements – student struggles, unions and township-based protest organizations –, built a black working-class base and cadre, fostered sister organizations in Swaziland and Zambia, and recruited Zimbabweans. Its focus on working with, and *within*, existing movements has played an important role in its development, experiences and impact.

Platformism is named for the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*, by veterans of the 1918–1921 anarchist revolution in Ukraine like Nestor Makhno (1888–1934) (Makhno, Archinov, & Mett, [1926] 2001). The *Platform* argues for unified, specifically anarchist political organizations with common theory, tactics and strategy, working inside and beyond popular class organizations including unions, to democratically win anarchism the ‘leadership of ideas’ (Makhno, Archinov, & Mett, [1926] 2001, pp. 20–21). It identifies this approach with Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) and Piotr Kropotkin (1842–1921).

Our discussion of anarchists is therefore largely a discussion of Platformists. These are primarily represented by the Workers Solidarity Federation (WSF, founded 1995), and its successors, the Bikisha (‘Strike’) Media Collective (BMC, formed 1999), and the Zabalaza (‘Struggle’) Anarchist Communist Federation (ZACF, formed 2003, restructured as the Zabalaza Anarchist Communist *Front*, in 2007). At no stage have either WSF or ZACF had more than 45 members; often they have been rather smaller. However, both have influenced a significantly larger milieu through propaganda, including periodicals like *Black Alert*, *Freedom*, *Tokoloko*, *Vuka Motsoaledi*, *Workers Solidarity*, *Zabalaza* and *Zabalaza News*; their own small publisher, Zabalaza Books; the translation of anarchist materials into Afrikaans, Tswana, and Zulu; ongoing participation in struggles and movements, and in popular, including worker and union, education programmes; dedicated study circles, Anarchist Political Schools and Red and Black Forums; and affiliated projects, including ‘workers’ assemblies’, the Phambili (‘Forward’) Motsolaedi Community Project, the Wits Inkululeko

(‘Freedom’) Anarchist Collective and the Tokologo (‘Freedom’) African Anarchist Collective. These activities are discussed in more detail below.

Naturally, we do not deny other anarchist or anarchist-identified currents exist in the country, nor do we dismiss their activities. However, we focus on the Platformists as the central current in a small anarchist movement, and so, of special interest, with three decades of unmatched involvement in popular class movements, and a continuous history of interactions on the left; further, their detailed archives provide rich sources of historical data; and finally, we are most familiar with this tradition.

On the last point, we need to note that we, the authors, have worked together closely in movements for years, are located in the anarchist tradition, and have been members of one or more formations in the local Platformist tradition at one or other stage. We have personally participated in some events and movements described. We are not politically neutral, and know this might be used to question our objectivity. However, like the late southern African revolutionary Harold Wolpe (1985), we believe political movements are ill-served by sloppy research, myth-making and self-delusion. Even politically-driven research must follow the conventions of scientific investigation of the world, based on a broadly realist approach.

Finally, our paper’s focus is on Gauteng province. We recognize this neglects important developments – notably, in Durban on the east coast of KwaZulu-Natal province, where the Platformists were very active – but the narrower focus allows us to concentrate on a rich set of experiences in the region the WSF/BMC/ZACF tradition has been most active. Gauteng is the country’s most populous province at nearly fifteen million people (2018) – a third of South Africa’s total population, and about as many people as nearby Zambia or Zimbabwe – and hub of the South (and southern) African political economy, responsible for a tenth of sub-Saharan Africa’s gross domestic product.

The Vaal Triangle in its south centres on mining and heavy industry, much of the latter state-owned before the 1980s privatization of giant state-owned SASOL oil and ISCOR steel plants. The central region includes the country’s largest city, Johannesburg. A string of old mining towns runs east to west, now mainly engaged in manufacturing and services. The north includes corporate headquarters and the Johannesburg Securities Exchange – Africa’s largest stock market – and Pretoria, the administrative capital and military headquarters. Gauteng is deeply unequal: a majority live in wretched township conditions with expensive but low-quality services, and dismal schools; nearly a quarter are unemployed. Soweto near Johannesburg and Sharpeville in the Vaal are doubtless the two townships best known to overseas readers.

The 1990s: the return of anarchism

In 1990, the apartheid state unbanned ANC, SACP and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). The enormous influence ANC had established by the late 1980s saw the party under Nelson Mandela winning the 1994 elections and all elections since, routing nationalist rivals the Azanian People’s Organization (AZAPO) and PAC. Although the 1990s transition from apartheid involved substantial political violence, the loosening of authoritarian rule, as elsewhere, generated ‘a sharp and rapid increase in general politicization and popular activation’ (O’Donnell & Schmitter, 1986, p. 26).

Massive waves of struggle occurred, with a widespread sense of radical possibilities and a deep interest in political issues. There were even efforts to transcend old divisions, like an unprecedented ‘Conference of the Left’ in November 1994, Johannesburg, between the leftwing of the ANC-centred ‘Congress’ tradition, SACP and Trotskyists. However, the summit had no concrete outcomes (von Holdt, 1994, pp. 56–57). A major division was the Congress left’s and SACP’s traditional support for a two-stage strategy: first, a ‘national-democratic revolution’ (NDR) involving a fundamental

deracialization of South Africa (led by ANC); then a socialist stage, traditionally conceived as a Soviet-style state (led by SACP). The Congress left, therefore, insisted the main task of socialists was to push the NDR leftwards to ensure the socialist stage arrived – and to do so by working within ANC and the Alliance, rather than ‘howl on the periphery’ (Gwede Mantashe, in Mantashe & Ngwane, 2004, p. 26).

The period saw lively debates within COSATU and SACP, which challenged some orthodoxies (Williams, 2015). First COSATU, then SACP, revised the two-stage framework into a left social-democratic strategy of ‘radical reform’ (e.g. COSATU/SACP, 1999). The working class was to use the democratic transition to win deep reforms, which would provide foundations for yet deeper reforms. Rather than a revolutionary rupture, there would be ‘building blocks for socialism’ within the NDR (e.g. Godongwana, 1992), secured through ANC, the Alliance, social dialogue and corporatism and (where necessary) mass struggle by COSATU. The growing gravity of ‘building blocks’ would shift society steadily into a democratic socialism.

The Trotskyists rejected both NDR and radical reform, the former as a dangerous detour and the latter as naïve class collaboration, not least given that ANC had embraced neo-liberalism in office, especially under Thabo Mbeki (Mandela’s successor). Most rejected ANC completely, in favour of a projected workers’ party separate from the ‘Stalinist’ SACP (Maisiri, 2014, p. 58). The Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA), for example, ran the Workers List Party in the 1994 elections (Maisiri, 2014, p. 58); another group ran the Workers International to Rebuild the Fourth International. The MWT left the ANC in 1996, the majority forming the Democratic Socialist Movement (DSM) (the Workers and Socialist Party, or WASP, from 2012).

Meanwhile, there was a proliferation of anarchist-identified groups and study circles in Durban, Johannesburg and Pretoria in the early 1990s. Probably the first was the Azanian Anarchist Alliance in 1991 at the University of the Witwatersrand (‘Wits’) in downtown Johannesburg. Formed by people from the Indian township of Lenasia (below Soweto) and Krugersdorp (a mining town west of Johannesburg), it published the one-off magazine *Revolt!* (1992). A larger Anarchist Awareness League emerged in Durban in 1992, joining a new Durban Anarchist Federation in 1993 (SL, 11 January 2011). Developments in Durban inspired an Anarchist Revolutionary Movement (ARM) in Gauteng in 1993 (SL, 11 January 2011).

There was no direct connection to the anarchist / syndicalist movement that faded in the 1920s. Some in the early 1990s came from the small, mainly white and Indian, punk and ‘zine scene. Others were radical university students, looking for alternatives to nationalism and Marxism-Leninism. The diversity was revealed in fundamental disagreements that cut across punk/non-punk and working-class/middle-class divides, over the meaning of ‘anarchism’ itself. The most important was between people mainly interested in counter-cultural activities, and those wanting to immerse anarchism in the national liberation movement and unions, i.e. the black working class.

One wing of ARM developed into a counter-cultural network, dropping the ARM name. ARM’s ‘class struggle’ wing – with links back to the Azanian Anarchist Alliance – identified itself with Bakunin and Kropotkin. It threw itself into black worker and student struggles at Wits (see below), published *Unrest* (1994) and South African editions of pamphlets from abroad, arguing that anarchists should participate in national liberation struggles to build ‘counter power’ and a ‘revolutionary and libertarian worker-peasant movement’ (LV, 1994: i, iii).

In mid-1995, ‘class struggle’ ARM renamed itself WSF, and relaunched *Unrest* as *Workers Solidarity*. It started weekly reading groups ‘to lay the basis for clear theory and tactics’, adopting the *Platform* and a comprehensive set of Position Papers developed in the reading groups (WSF National Secretariat, 1997, p. 2; WSF [1996], 1998a, 1998b). The WSF Position Papers were subsequently adopted by both BMC and ZACF, and represented the local Platformists’ core theoretical and

strategic framework, with detailed, class-centred, anti-state, South (and southern) Africa-focused historically grounded analyses.

The general approach of the WSF/ BMC/ ZACF current was to win the ‘most widespread understanding and influence for our ideas and methods in the class and in society, primarily because we believe that these alone will expedite a successful revolutionary transformation of society’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 172). The project was a social revolution, aiming at a libertarian, stateless communist society based on self-management, common ownership, a radical extension of participatory democracy and the abolition of states, parliaments and capitalist corporations, a libertarian communism.

The tradition did not aim to win influence for WSF/ BMC/ ZACF as such, but to promote *anarchism* as the ‘leading idea’ within the actually-existing movements and struggles of the working-class, i.e. the most widespread possible influence for anarchism, expressed in popular self-activity and organizing against the current system and for a new society. The ‘working class’ was understood broadly as including the poor, unemployed and under-employed, workers’ families, and workers of all grades and occupations lacking control of work and society. This was the majority of South African society, as well as of blacks, Coloureds and Indians. The anarchist political organization would not substitute for the masses, but foster ‘class consciousness’ and ‘revolutionary intransigence’ (Makhno et al., [1926] 2001, pp. 20–21).

Nationalists like ANC were progressive in comparison to the colonial and apartheid regimes they opposed, but their project – using the state, cross-class organizing, creating a ‘local’ bourgeoisie – was fundamentally unable to provide real freedom for the majority (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 67–77, 127). The ‘new South Africa’ launched in 1994 was ruled by an alliance between old white capital and the new black political elite, and maintained South Africa’s role as a small imperialist power in the region (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 68, 71–72, 104, 109, 114, 120).

Nationalism was relatively progressive at times – when it was in opposition – but always represented a major obstacle to the genuine national liberation for the masses, which required ‘Proletarian Anti-State National Liberation and Social Revolution against the parasitic class, by a front of oppressed classes across all borders’ (ZACF Constitution, 2003, p. 3(d)). Thus WSF/ ZACF rejected the two-stage NDR approach for a ‘one-stage revolution’; it rejected support for any ruling class faction even if ‘anti-imperialist’, or for the ANC government (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 121–123, 126).

The post-apartheid parliamentary democracy was a ‘massive victory’, won by the masses, and included real gains in civil and political rights, but was unable to end the apartheid legacy e.g. the township system, and the cheap black labour system, pillars of South African capitalism (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 66–67). Only through a radical reconstruction based on a self-managed economy managed by ‘weekly meetings and elected shop-stewards committees – without the bosses’ (WSF, January 1996) ‘can we end capitalist exploitation and the legacy of apartheid oppression’ (WSF, 19 August 1997). Real reforms in a wide range of areas were possible and desirable, but basic inequalities would persist, and existing forms of oppression evolve, so long as the class system, including the state, continued.

Revolution required both widespread revolutionary consciousness – a revolutionary counter-culture – and organs of counter-power – mass organizations outside and against both state and capital. According to current ZACF Regional Secretary Warren McGregor – an activist from the Coloured townships of Cape Town on the south coast – counter-power based in the popular classes will ‘challenge the ruling class’ in the present, and ‘reconstruct society from below at some point in the future’ (McGregor, 2018a, p. 158). Syndicalist unions, undertaking a revolutionary general strike, were a prime example. The working class must directly ‘take power through ... democratic mass organisations such as the unions’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 18).

Counter-power would emerge from struggles, from existing mass movements and through ‘organising the unorganised’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 41). Existing unions had to be reformed into syndicalist ones by ‘boring-from-within’ and independent rank-and-file movements (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 8, 23, 34–41, 172). Building counter-power required fighting in the present for democratic structures, and political pluralism, and winning reforms from below, but had to be complemented by fighting for the leadership of anarchist ideas. The approach was prefigurative, ‘building tomorrow today’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 174). Immediate struggles should be pushed into direct action and bottom-up organizing, rather than the parliamentary/ party system, corporatism or courts. In this way working-class autonomy could be secured, and capacities, consciousness and organization built (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 173–174).

For the WSF/ BMC/ ZACF tradition, building counter-power and revolutionary counter-culture also required an emphasis on opposing all forms of oppression in the here-and-now, enabling a unified movement of the popular classes, and a class struggle-based internationalism (McGregor, 2018a). Racial, national and women’s oppression had multiple causes, but were continually (re)generated by capitalism and states. Abolition of the class system and a libertarian communist society entailed the massive redistribution of power and wealth required to create genuinely egalitarian and democratic relations.

Only the oppressed, popular classes had the interest, numbers and structural power to undertake this radical reconstruction of society (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 19–21). However, these classes could only be unified if they opposed all forms of oppression, including within themselves (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 72). The corollary was WSF/ BMC/ ZACF analyses rejected labour aristocracy, ‘privilege’ and Third Worldist theories, as well as crude identity and culturalist politics. They argued imperialism, racism, national oppression, and the oppression of gays, lesbians and women harmed the popular classes as a whole, including the working classes in oppressor nations and countries, working class men, whites etc., serving ruling class interests.

Left interactions in the 1990s: the student movement

The *de facto* orientation was towards participation in actually-existing mass movements, including COSATU, and a core thesis that ‘The Black working class and poor will make the South African revolution’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 76). Anarchism was a ‘philosophy of class struggle, of revolutionary action by the exploited workers and peasants and poor – not ... a set of ‘life-style’ choices’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 8) or efforts at ‘exits’ from the system; the task was building an ‘anarchist current within the popular classes’, not a ‘class struggle current in an inward-looking radical ... scene’ (RF, 29 January 2018). This meant participation in black working-class struggles and movements, while challenging rival approaches, and authoritarian methods (WSF, [1996], 1998b, p. 16):

In general we will work in any campaign that is fighting for something we think would be a step forward. We will work alongside anyone to achieve this. We will not however hide our politics in order to get into or stay in any campaign ...

Anarchists could and would work alongside other forces, among them Marxists, progressive nationalists including from Congress, faith-based activists etc. including in formal alliances – so long as this did not compromise their political independence and principles (WSF, [1996], 1998b, pp. 73, 173–174).

This inevitably involved intersections. A major focus for ‘class struggle’ ARM were worker and student protests at Wits from 1993; WSF continued this path. These struggles were led by COSATU’s National Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), and the Wits section of the ANC-aligned

South African Students Congress (SASCO, formed 1991), the largest student formation in higher education, formally Marxist-Leninist (Nephawe, 2011, pp. 33–38). They also involved the Socialist Students Action Committee (SSAC), part of the global International Socialist Tendency, mainly organized as Keep Left! from 1998 (Maisiri, 2014, p. 58).

ARM/ WSF worked in militant campaigns alongside SASCO and SSAC. Around 1995, as Wits SASCO became less active, ARM/ WSF and SSAC came to play the central role in campus struggles, working closely together in the ‘Campaign to Defend the Wits Five’ – four NEHAWU members, and one SSAC member, being prosecuted by Wits, two also facing criminal charges – with meetings, marches, petitions and speeches. ARM participated in a lengthy NEHAWU sleep-in in May. Later that year, WSF worked with SSAC and the Azanian Students Congress (AZASCO, AZAPO’s youth wing) in the organizing committee for the ‘Wits Save Mumia Abu-Jamal Campaign’. In general, relations with other groups were cordial, although – as relative newcomers – the anarchists had to work hard to establish credibility (apparently successfully: they were reliably informed they were under state surveillance in 1995).

ARM/ WSF took care to explain – and sought win people to – its positions while working cooperatively in broader movements. It opposed authoritarian, class-collaborationist, nationalist and statist approaches, putting forward an alternative. Its engagement was facilitated by some overlaps in ideas and concepts. For example, WSF’s stress on the black working class was hardly unique: the Congress left and AZAPO also spoke in terms of a ‘leading’ role for the black working class; that unions could be, in some sense, ‘revolutionary’ was commonsense in activist circles.

Left divergence in the student milieu

However, such convergence did not remove real differences: ongoing, often intense debates with nationalists and Marxists proved valuable in sharpening the anarchists’ positions. ‘Class struggle’ ARM/ WSF avoided a blistering polemical style. It preferred to contrast its views with those of others, frankly, but without denouncing entire organizations or specific activists (RF, 29 January 2018). For example, their texts show a tendency to redeploy commonly used terms and rhetoric to convey a distinctively anarchist message. Where SASCO spoke of a ‘people’s university’, ‘transformation’ and ‘democracy’, Platformists argued for a ‘workers’ university’ run by academics/ worker/ student committees and assemblies, part of a society-wide ‘total transformation’ (ARM, 23 March 1995). Whereas SASCO tended to favour transformation via ANC intervention and university-wide negotiations backed by protests – and COSATU, ‘radical reform’ – anarchists stressed autonomy from official university structures as key to building counter-power (e.g. ARM, 23 March 1995; WSF, 1995). Whereas many activists tended to see students as a force for change equally important to workers, the anarchists supported student struggles but insisted students lacked the class character to fundamentally challenge capitalism, the apartheid legacy or ruling class control over the university (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 146–148).

While ‘class struggle’ ARM/ WSF accepted worker-student alliances – as did NEHAWU and SASCO – they wanted popular class-based united fronts, rather than multi-class popular fronts. They proposed a national Student Union to merge party-linked student groups – AZASCO and SASCO were party wings – plus student alliances with unions on ‘workers’ terms’ (WSF, [1996], 1998a, p. 147). A Student Union would mean a unified body within which different currents could co-exist, cooperate and compete. For unions, likewise, the anarchists wanted ‘One Big Union’ independent of political parties, but engaged in struggle over political and social issues.

The WSF/ BCM/ ZACF preference was thus for politically pluralist, class-wide ‘social’ organizations (including unions), rather than setting up different ones for anarchists, Congress, Africanists,

moderates, liberals etc. This emphasis on mass ‘social’ organizations as the engine of change was a key point of divergence with nationalists and most of the left. These thoughts in terms of the formation and growth of a political party that could win state power, and thereby liberate the oppressed. Rather than see popular movements as wings of, or launch pads for, ‘political’ formations like parties, South Africa’s Platformists viewed them instead as sites of potential counter-power, insisting alliances with political parties engaged in the pursuit of state power would corrupt, cripple and contain. The anarchists’ proposals got nowhere; scope for unity in the form of permanent common organizations was fundamentally limited by party loyalties. Instead, left cooperation took the form of engagements between currents within committees, meetings, rallies and united fronts in the larger student movement and the worker-student alliance of NEHAWU-SASCO.

Left interactions in the 1990s: anarchists and unions

From 1996, there was a shift in the composition and focus of WSF in Gauteng, from the mostly black, militant student milieu to a mostly black worker base. While WSF continued ‘class struggle’ ARM’s earlier success in recruiting black students, from 1996 it recruited a rapidly growing number of COSATU activists, including shop-stewards. In June, WSF militants established a ‘workers assembly’ at courier firm Mounties in Johannesburg. WSF Durban – always primarily based among young workers – meanwhile published *Agitate* (later *Freedom*), rebuilt the Anarchist Awareness League project into Zabalaza Books (still the main publisher of cheap anarchist pamphlets in southern Africa, and part of ZACF), and developed a presence in Umlazi, Durban’s main township. In 1997, WSF directly inspired the founding of Zambia’s Anarchist and Workers’ Solidarity Movement – mainly university staff in Lusaka – and in 1998, spread into Cape Town.

While WSF remained active at Wits, with public meetings on the land question, sports, the Spanish Revolution etc., also attending Gay Pride, women’s and student marches, it now emphasized COSATU. COSATU was not the only union federation but it was certainly the largest, most militant, radical and democratic federation amongst Coloured and black workers. At its October 1997 congress, WSF formally adopted a union turn (Proposal by ‘NU’, 1997, p. 4):

Many students, especially at the elite institution of Wits, are very middle class and upper class in their orientation ... We are a working class organisation and need to direct the little time and resources that we have ... Even if we build an autonomous Wits branch the activities of that branch should be directed towards building in the working class ...

‘Class struggle’ ARM, and then WSF, had always aimed to recruit workers, and win influence in unions. WSF’s translation of materials was part of this. Anarchist students were always seen as recruits for work in the working class and its movements; the 1997 decision was that the time had come to focus on union work.

A major factor enabling WSF’s transition in Gauteng into a predominantly black working-class group was participation in general strikes. While most ‘Congress’ tradition activity declined country-wide from 1995, COSATU activity intensified as the federation engaged in mass actions to shape post-apartheid state policy. It organized huge protests in June 1995; a general strike against privatization in January 1996 was averted at the 11th hour; there was a general strike in April 1996, mass rallies in March 1997, and general strikes in June and August.

At COSATU events, WSF leaflets like *No to Privatisation!* (WSF, January 1996), *Lock-out the Bosses!* (WSF, 30 April 1996), *Fight the Bosses!* (WSF, 19 August 1997), *Against Bosses – Against Racists* (1998a) got a wonderful reception, as did *Workers Solidarity*, and booklets like *Revolutionary*

Trade Unionism (WSF, 1997), *Breaking the Chains of Imperialism* (1998b), *Reject GEAR* (1998c) and *The Poor Must Take Back the Land* (1998d).

WSF materials pushed for workers' control of unions, and 'over ... land and factories through ... union action' i.e. syndicalism (WSF, 19 August 1997). This required reform of unions by internal 'opposition groups' that would challenge union bureaucracies, fight for women's equality, independence from parties and the Alliance, unity across federations and industries, and bringing immigrants and unemployed into the unions (WSF, 1997).

Another means of engagement with organized labour was the Workers' Library and Museum, a labour service organization operating a resource centre and venues in Newtown, downtown Johannesburg. From 1998, WSF played an increasingly prominent role in the organization. At the time, Workers' Library projects, public workshops and its Oral History Project had largely stalled; its facilities were dilapidated; its administration was in disarray; its finances in crisis.

WSF participation took place through the Workers' Library's democratic structures. Library members paid a modest annual fee, and in return could take out books, and elect the Management Committee – an unpaid, all-volunteer body – at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Anarchists joined the education subcommittee in 1998, and were elected to key Management Committee portfolios at the 1999 AGM. WSF (followed by BMC: see below) worked extremely hard at reviving the organization, driving the revival of public workshops, rebuilding relations with COSATU and attending the weekly Johannesburg COSATU Local, enabling a t-shirt printing project, and establishing a new Workers' Bookshop. The only such shop in country at the time, this sold hundreds of copies of left-wing pamphlets, shirts, posters and newspapers. WSF/ BMC helped reposition the Workers' Library as a key meeting space for unions and social movements – less excitingly, they helped wrap up older Workers' Library projects, sorted the finances, recovered lost stock, and helped fix the premises.

It must be stressed WSF/ BMC anarchists envisaged the Workers' Library centre developing into a non-partisan hub of working-class self-organization, debate and political pluralism. While anarchists argued their views and vision – and the Workers' Bookshop carried many anarchist texts – they never excluded others, nor rejected cooperation across divisions. For example, the Workers' Bookshop carried a wide range of Marxist and union materials, including *APUDUSAN Newsletter* (by a section of the Unity Movement, a Trotskyist current), COSATU's *Shopsteward*, *Keep Left!* magazine, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa's (NUMSA's) *NUMSA News*, SACP's *Umsebenzi* and COSATU's South African Municipal Workers Union's (SAMWU's) *SAMWU Worker News*.

The Workers' Library revival involved interlinked engagements across left divisions. First, anarchists were central to the Management Committee, but never an absolute majority: they had to work closely with members from Congress and Trotskyist backgrounds.

Second, the revival of the Workers' Library required financial sustainability. This was largely secured through a new partnership with Khanya College, a Marxist-oriented labour service organization with Trotskyist links. Unused office space was leased to Khanya, in return for Khanya refurbishing the property, paying overheads and providing administrative support – most importantly a joint effort to run the venues as an efficient 'Zabalaza Conference Centre'. In these ways, Platformists were central in keeping the Workers' Library – a unique space – open, and building links with a wide range of progressive forces, while promoting their own project.

WSF's emphasis on unions and its work at the Workers' Library also led to sustained engagements with some on the COSATU union left, mainly in its Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU, restructured into the Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers Union, CEPP-WAWU, 1999) and SAMWU. While COSATU was firmly aligned to ANC and SACP, there were

critical left voices within, notably in CWIU/ CEPPWAWU, NUMSA, SAMWU, and in its South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (SACCAWU).

NUMSA's left was predominantly within the Congress tradition, SACP its party of choice – but many had misgivings about ANC. There was however a significant independent left presence in SAMWU and SACCAWU, while CWIU/ CEPPWAWU had a significant Trotskyist current, including then-union president Abraham Agulhas (see e.g. Collins, 1995, pp. 49–50). CWIU/ CEPPWAWU Trotskyists had a significant presence in powerful cross-COSATU bodies like the Wits Regional Shop Stewards' Council in Gauteng, where they openly criticized ANC (see e.g. von Holdt, 1995, pp. 20–23).

Left divergence in the union milieu

By 1998, the majority of WSF members were black African men, mostly COSATU. This situation required very different interactions with the left than those in the student movement. COSATU unions were mass organizations – some, like NUMSA, over 320,000-strong – and part of the Alliance. Open opposition to ANC was increasingly risky, as shown by the expulsion of Agulhas from CWIU in 1997, who then formed his own Oil, Chemical, General, and Allied Workers Union (OCGAWU).

At Wits, ARM/ WSF could immerse itself directly in a vibrant student movement comprising a range of currents and organizations. There was no prospect of joint work between the tiny anarchist formation and giant COSATU, which dominated black worker organizing. WSF had to engage individual people in COSATU carefully, avoid alienating possible supporters, get past gate-keepers, and avoid the growing clampdown.

There were two main approaches. WSF material directed to ordinary COSATU militants, like material directed to students, avoided attacking specific organizations and personalities, and used the terminology of the milieu. Leaflets spoke of the need for union independence from 'all political parties', and the neo-liberal character of 'the government' (WSF, 1997).

By not directly attacking ANC, WSF hoped to avoid being locked out of COSATU; the formulations also helped avoid the suggestion that another party was preferable to ANC. By contrast, many Trotskyists were obliged to specifically attack ANC (and SACP), as their aim was a new workers' party (e.g. Agulhas in Collins, 1995, pp. 50–51). Keep Left! took another tack, arguing for a 'critical' vote for the ANC to avoid alienating loyalists. WSF knew COSATU ranks had deep reservoirs of cynicism about political parties, and – noting the class was not monolithic – was less interested in ANC loyalists than flowing in these reservoirs.

The second approach involved direct engagements with committed union activists from other left traditions. It was thought that some could be won over; this never happened. But meetings and chats helped develop personal relationships, and facilitated cooperation in spaces like the Workers' Library. Again, debates and discussions were valuable learning experiences. Discussions, frank and often cordial, showed the possibility for constructive interactions. There were conflicts – some bitter, painful and lasting – but a better left without sectarianism and dishonesty seemed at least possible.

These engagements also made it clear the divides were very real: too deep for any meaningful merger, they were revealed instead as a source of *strength*. Different perspectives on, for example, ANC, unions, uneven consciousness in the working-class, etc. enriched debates, while concrete developments allowed different approaches to be tested. For example, the formation of OCGAWU raised issues around the nature of unions and COSATU – and the viability of 'boring-from-

within'. And since it was possible to have sustained and fruitful cooperation across left divides – just as in the student movement – a fuller merger was also not needed.

Left interactions in the 2000s: the 'new social movements'

ANC, which entered the 1990s as a radical nationalist party engaged in an armed struggle and at the head of urban and workplace uprisings, had merged with the capitalist state by decade's end. Its nationalist rivals were marginalized: AZAPO got just one seat in parliament in 1999 and 2004, PAC three; the only significant opposition party was the centre-right Democratic Party (the Democratic Alliance, DA, from 2000), overwhelmingly based amongst racial minorities. WOSA was in decline; WIRFI's successor, the Workers International Vanguard League, got under 700 votes in the 1999 general elections; when the Socialist Party of Azania (SOPA, a 1998 breakaway from AZAPO) ran in 2004 it got no seat.

Elected on a social-democratic platform, ANC soon followed global trends, adopting neo-liberalism as a means of restoring economic growth and building a black bourgeoisie. It used a number of means to manage the contradictions inherent in a capitalist post-apartheid order that provided new rights, while leaving the majority impoverished and exploited.

Extensive use was made of patriotism, patronage and police. The Congress left was marginalized (Buhlungu, 2004, p. 2), including COSATU's 'radical reform' project. There was a systematic campaign to co-opt the leadership of ANC-aligned formations. It proved, however, impossible to transform these organizations into simple transmission belts. Success undermined their value, as in the case of the ANC-aligned South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO, formed 1992), which united most of the old 'civics': township-based anti-apartheid community organizations. Relentless pressure on SANCO to support ANC-led municipal governments (and their cost-recovery campaigns) crippled it (Sinwell, 2011, pp. 64–65). Conversely, while COSATU bled militants to top ANC and government jobs, and members to neo-liberal restructuring, it continued to wage mass campaigns. National SASCO leaders applauded ANC's neo-liberal cuts to higher education (Nieftagodien, 1997), but local SASCO branches actively opposed cuts.

ANC and SACP were, however, increasingly successful in blocking the independent left's access to COSATU (Maisiri, 2014, p. 60). There was also an accelerating crackdown on the independent left already active within Alliance structures. In 1999, Trevor Ngwane – Trotskyist and ANC town councilor from Soweto – was expelled from Johannesburg municipality for voting against a neo-liberal plan, 'iGoli 2002'. In 2000, Dale McKinley, SACP Johannesburg chair, was expelled for public criticisms of ANC, and Dinga Sikwebu, NUMSA National Educator, was fired for criticizing union leaders. In 2003, John Appolis, Regional Secretary of CEPPWAWU's Wits region, was expelled with others, establishing a new General Industries Workers Union of South Africa (GIWUSA). Keep Left!, which worked within SACP in the latter 1990s, faced intense pressure once it supported Ngwane and McKinley.

While WSF was doing relatively well in the late 1990s, with steady growth, it was naturally affected by the closing space. It also suffered growing internal problems: limited resources, managing inductions of its growing membership, and drifts in strategy and tactics; its project of building an anarchist current in unions could drift into WSF providing union-type services.

In August 1999, WSF decided to dissolve into the Bikisha Media Collective (BMC) in Gauteng, and the Anarchist Union (later the Zabalaza Action Group, ZAG) and Zabalaza Books in Durban / Umlazi. The aim was to refocus the Platformist current on its strengths in analysis, propaganda and publishing, rather than act as a small, public, political group. Cadres would remain closely

connected, participate in structures where space was available – BMC continued to work in the Workers’ Library into late 2002 – and open new avenues.

BMC retained a deep interest in COSATU and was active in the campaign against ‘Wits 2001’ at Wits in 1999-2000, led by NEHAWU (see below). In Durban, ZAG operated an Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizing committee on a dual-card basis and formed another ‘workers assembly’. BMC set up Red and Black Forums (RBFs): public workshops and discussion groups. Initially in rooms booked at the Workers’ Library, Johannesburg RBFs developed a steady membership, and by 2001 were participating in protests and issuing statements, on, for example, ‘September 11’, and privatization (BMC/ZAG, 2001b). BMC also published jointly with ZAG and Zabalaza Books, including pamphlet versions of the Position Papers, a new BMC/ Zabalaza Books magazine *Zabalaza* (from 2001), and public statements, including on the World Conference against Racism (WCAR) in Durban in 2001, which attracted major demonstrations (BMC/ZAG, 2001a).

The independent left was struggling to find ‘political relevance’ by the end of the 1990s (Buhlungu, 2004, p. 2). There was a general retreat from COSATU – among some (not BMC/ WSF, though), growing anti-COSATU sentiment. There was a sense across the independent left that it needed to cooperate more systematically and constructively. Developments at the Workers’ Library were part of this larger trend. In 1999, for example, a Lesedi Socialist Study Group was formed at Wits, drawing together anarchists; Marxist-Leninists from SASCO; and WOSA, Keep Left! and others, for weekly debates: WSF / BMC members played a key role. In 2000, an inclusive left magazine, *Debate: Voices from the South African Left*, was re-established, publicly launched at the Workers’ Library with Sikwebu the main speaker; its editorial collective included different currents – including anarchism, for a time.

While the retreat from COSATU led some on the independent left into new alignments – enthusiastic, even uncritical support of wildcat strikes, GIWUSA and OCGAWU – most in Gauteng, including the anarchists, drifted from unions into a growing wave of township-based organizing. There was a working class rebellion against the inequities of the township system, and municipal neo-liberal measures imposed by both ANC and DA town councilors. These protests helped generate what were known in South Africa as ‘new social movements’: neighbourhood-based and issue-based township groups, heavily composed of the long-term unemployed and old-age pensioners, and generally with few (if any) links to SANCO civics. Since ANC routinely won most municipal seats in township areas (outside the DA’s Western Cape provincial stronghold), these movements stepped into the gap created by SANCO’s decline, and invariably clashed with the ANC government.

By the early 2000s, anarchists and others on the independent left developed a significant presence in the ‘new social movements’. A major entry point for WSF/ BMC anarchists was the 1999–2000 struggle against a major neo-liberal restructuring programme at Wits, ‘Wits 2001’. This included the planned lay-off around 620 workers – mostly black, mostly NEHAWU – in June 2000.

WSF/ BMC played a central role in the resistance. There was a significant degree of left cooperation. Platformists, autonomists, Trotskyists and SASCO worked together in the Wits 2001 Crisis Committee. Lesedi Socialist Study Group transitioned into a campaigning body against Wits 2001, holding rallies, collecting signatures and issuing public statements: efforts, however, to remake Lesedi into a ‘broad left’ multi-current group failed. Anarchists were part of the Concerned Academics Group, with Marxists and social democrats; in the Post Graduate Forum – a student council – winning a seat; and within NEHAWU; they were always a distinct voice. As before, different currents cooperated around concrete issues; a deeper convergence was neither feasible nor necessary.

A parallel movement was developing in greater Johannesburg, where an Anti-iGoli 2002 Forum linking SAMWU, the Independent Municipal and Allied Workers Union (IMATU), street traders, ‘new social movements’, and the Johannesburg SACP emerged. In mid-2000, the Wits 2001 Crisis Committee and the Anti-iGoli 2002 Forum merged, forming the Anti-Privatisation Forum (APF). APF, based in Gauteng, was one of a number of emerging coalitions of independent and Congress left groups, ‘new social movements’ (and sometimes, unions): others were the Concerned Citizens’ Forum in Durban (formed 1999), the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town (2000), the countrywide Landless People’s Movement (LPM, 2001), and *Abahlali base-Mjondolo* (‘people of the shacks’) in Durban (2005).

A fuller history of APF and its key affiliates falls outside this paper (see e.g. Buhlungu, 2004; Hlatshwayo, 2013; McKinley, 2012; Runciman, 2015; Sinwell, 2011). However, APF is interesting as an example of the strengths and limits of left interactions – and as *the* key site of left convergences and divergences in 2000s Gauteng. At one level APF was an example of truly remarkable co-operation. In its early years, APF brought together independent left groups, among them BMC/ ZACF, the DSM, Keep Left!, the Socialist Group (associated with Ngwane), and autonomists; the Congress-aligned Wits NEHAWU, Johannesburg SACP, Wits SASCO and national SAMWU; IMATU, then affiliated to the moderate Federation of South African Unions (FEDUSA, formed 1997); and ‘new social movements’ greatly varying in size, structure, politics and power. It included the Congress left, but was not under Congress control; it bridged, for a time, divisions between Congress left and independent left, and within the independent left; the independent left played a leading role; and many thought this raised the prospect of a new mass-based alternative politics. APF also emerged against the backdrop of the rising ‘anti-globalisation’ movement in the West and elsewhere, and was certainly seen in South Africa as part of the same global revolt.

BMC anarchists were APF founder members, served on its secretariat the Activists’ Forum, as well as on its Coordinating Committee, an expanded body largely comprised of delegates from mass-based affiliates. One of two APF media officers was BMC (Lucien van der Walt). BMC and ZAG (the latter involved in the Concerned Citizens’ Forum) played a visible role in ‘new social movements’ protests, including at the WCAR, issuing joint statements (e.g. BMC/ZAG, 2001a).

The Platformists also launched a local Anarchist Black Cross (ABC), publishing *Black Alert* from 2002, to ‘support not only anarchist prisoners but prisoners from other areas of the class struggle’, including ‘activists from other socialist groups, community-based organisations and organisations’ (2003a, p. 14). The aim was solidarity in struggle, a horizontal network, ‘a practical example of anarchism’ and winning ‘grassroots radicals over to the antiauthoritarian side’. Plans were made for a larger, non-partisan Anti-Repression Network based on ‘anti-authoritarian, directly-democratic, decentralised and nonhierarchical organisation(s)’ (*Black Alert*, 2003b, p. 2). As developments like this indicate, the anarchist movement around the Platformists was ‘rapidly expanding, almost on a weekly basis’ (*Black Alert*, 2003a, p. 14). New anarchist groups emerged amongst radical youth in the Soweto APF milieu, forming the Black Action Group in the Motsoaledi shack settlement, and the Shesha (‘Hurry!’) Action Group in Dlamini. On May Day 2003, ABC, Black Action Group, BMC, Shesha Action Group, Zabalaza Books and ZAG founded ZACF with a two-day congress at the Workers’ Library.

ZACF adopted the WSF Position Papers, and replaced BMC in APF. Its structure, however, was a federation of separate collectives and members joined through the collectives – at odds with the unitary conception of Platformist anarchist political organization. ZACF soon formed a Swaziland section, and won Zimbabwean recruits, developing an unwieldy multi-national structure and styling itself the home of ‘southern’ rather than ‘South’ African anarchism.

This was a time of crossovers of members between independent left groups in South Africa. ZACF founder member and key Motsoaledi figure, Phillip Nyalungu, moved from supporting PAC to joining Keep Left! in the 1990s, and then anarchism in the early 2000s. The late Bobo Makhoba – a founder member of the largest APF affiliate, the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (SECC, formed 2000), Shesha Action Group and ZACF – moved from ZACF to the Socialist Group, becoming a ‘keen Marxist’ (see Sosibo, 2011). These journeys entailed, not a convergence in politics, but profound personal shifts in political outlook.

Left divergence in the ‘new social movements’

While APF showed the possibility for constructive left engagement, it also highlighted, like previous experiences, the practical limits of left unity and underlined that a fuller left merger was neither possible nor desirable. For instance, APF affiliates varied greatly. Some ‘new social movements’ in APF were overtly non-aligned; some had significant left influences. For example, SECC was influenced by the Socialist Group, but also had Keep Left! and anarchist / ZACF members. The second major affiliate, the Working Class Coordinating Committee – based in the Vaal, especially Sebokeng (near Sharpeville) among retrenched ISCOR workers, mostly ex-NUMSA (Hlatshwayo, 2013) – had a significant SOPA presence.

The neighbourhood-based Motsoaledi Concerned Residents (MCR, formed 2005) APF affiliate in Soweto was initiated by ZACF and grew out of the anarchists’ Phambili (‘Forward!’) Motsoaledi Community Project. Established in 2002, the Project involved a ‘people’s library’, crèche and food garden, publishing the anarchist *Vuka* (‘Awake!’) *Motsoaledi* newsletter. It was driven by ZACF – not least Black Action Group and visiting Swazi members. ZACF put huge energy into Motsoaledi, aiming at a bastion of working-class counter-power and anarchist influence.

This was one of many Platformist anarchist achievements at the time. ZACF worked in APF, Durban and Swaziland. It built the ABC and initiated the Anti-Repression Network, and through ABC, made contact with the jailed Abel Ramarope in 2004, a former PAC guerilla. He joined ABC, establishing an anarchist study group in his Pretoria prison (Independent Online, 2006). ZACF also maintained some activities at Wits, including a modest role in protests in 2007; published regular statements, as well as *Zabalaza*, *Black Alert* and *Vuka Motsoaledi / Motsoaledi News*; and operated Zabalaza Books. For the first years of APF, BMC/ ZACF militants also served on the APF secretariat, and remained heavily involved in the Workers’ Library.

There was, however, simply no agreement in APF on what was to be done. Opposition to neo-liberalism – the ‘anti’ in APF – enabled unity, but did not answer what should be put in its place, or how (Veriava & Naidoo, 2013). Such issues cannot be solved by emphasizing (cf. Veriava & Naidoo, 2013) ‘organizing’ and ‘struggle’ or rejecting ‘ideology’. The content, form and aspirations of both ‘struggle’ and ‘organising’ are highly contested, so doing more of either does not solve the problems. Treating these divergences as the intrusion of external ‘ideology’ into a pure working class subject that, if left alone, somehow automatically generates communism is mistaken: the class is never homogenous, nor cut-off from ruling class pressures. The 1980s saw, for example, immensely popular ‘workerist’ initiatives rapidly defeated by ANC/ SACP ‘populist’, demagogic and militarist currents within the unions themselves (Byrne, 2011).

All struggle is prefigurative: form and content profoundly shapes outcomes – but what the form and content *should* be is not obvious nor is one trajectory inevitable. A powerful reformist current in APF (usually overlooked in studies) stressed enforcing Constitutional rights, electing honest state officials, and better state regulation of essential services. It played a major role in the APF-initiated

Coalition against Water Privatisation formed in 2003, and helped move APF towards a growing focus on court cases.

The Congress-aligned APF current wanted ‘radical reform’. Politically this meant focusing on the Tripartite Alliance and shifting ANC policy, with COSATU and SACP increasingly drawn into intra-ANC factional politics. A third APF current, closely associated with the DSM and the Socialist Group, favoured mass struggle and confrontation, rejecting ANC and SACP. But it wanted a new workers’ party, backed by APF and COSATU, to unite the working class, take state power and carry out extensive nationalizations (Maisiri, 2014). SOPA viewed *itself* as that party (SOPA, 1999), seeking APF backing for its election campaigns. Keep Left! had ties to the Socialist Group, but took a fourth position: ‘critical support’ to large existing parties that attracted people on the left – meaning ‘critical support’ to ANC and SACP in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The autonomists were diverse, but shared the anarchists’ rejection of electoral politics, state power and associated party-building. Autonomists and anarchists differed profoundly, too, autonomists tending to reject formal organizing, and viewing larger strategy as hierarchical and unnecessary. The focus was immediate popular self-activity, viewed as intrinsically challenging capitalism with ‘self-valorisation’. The problem with APF was seen as it becoming institutionalized, subject to ‘ideology’, and opened to official ‘governmentality’ by the state (e.g. Veriava & Naidoo, 2013).

Finally, the anarchists: BMC/ZACF/ZAG insisted that both state and private ownership were ‘profit-driven, anti-worker and anti-union in nature’ (BMC/ZAG, 2001b). ESKOM – the giant electricity corporation central to municipal neo-liberal reforms – was completely state-owned (BMC/ZAG, 2001b). APF was typically not fighting privatization at all, but state entities bent on cost recovery and commercialization. More state control was thus a meaningless, even dangerous, goal, since state and private ownership and control were so often indistinguishable.

Neo-liberalism could also not be challenged in courts, or through ANC. Neo-liberalism was a new phase of global capitalism, not a policy choice; neither elections nor a new party would end it (BMC/ZAG, 2001b). COSATU’s ‘radical reform’ proposals reforms were utopian (van der Walt, 2011). The anarchists’ argued for an ‘active boycott’ of elections, and developing counter power and revolutionary counter-culture in APF-linked struggles and movements (ZACF, 2004, 2010) as a step towards ‘collectivising’ public services under popular control (BMC/ZAG, 2001b). Essential services in townships should be ‘decommodified’ by rates boycotts and the (illegal) reconnection of services (in which ZACF members were actually involved). This, argued ZACF, required a concrete programme, a battle of ideas and strong anarchist organizations. The evidence bears this out. Post-apartheid, even militant protest movements often ‘remain tied to the ANC after they win struggles’ (Sinwell, 2011, p. 73), the ANC vote actually peaking in the era of ‘new social movements’, rather than declining.

Left divides, then, were rooted in deep *divergences* of principles, theory and strategy, such as could not be removed by calls for left unity. Managed effectively, and democratically, these differences enrich debate, capacities, analyses and strategies (McGregor, 2018b). Managed badly, they can be profoundly destructive – and this, sadly, was increasingly the case in APF. There were ugly conflicts in the independent left around the WCAR. Meanwhile, NEHAWU, SACP, SAMWU and SASCO dropped out of APF, viewing it as ‘hi-jacked’ by anti-ANC elements (Buhlungu, 2004, pp. 9–10). COSATU and SACP ended up backing an ANC faction led by corrupt politician Jacob Zuma, who ousted Mbeki in 2007. Naïve hopes this would end neo-liberalism were soon dashed, the Zumaites using privatization deals to loot the state, presiding over growing inequality and the 2012 massacre of 34 striking miners at Marikana.

An effort to link APF, *Abahlali* and others in a national Social Movements Indaba collapsed in acrimony. According to Appolis, former APF chairperson, the heavy-handed push by some

Trotskyists to commit APF to a new workers' party stifled any 'flowering of engagement' with different views (Appolis, 2010, p. 9). While anti-election views were prevalent in APF, the 2004 APF congress deciding against participating in elections, certain factions managed to get APF resources poured into pro-election workshops, while SECC ran its own party. Sectarian polemics and labelling were used to silence opponents, ZACF among the victims. Conflict over access to donor resources fed into the mess. SECC was wracked by internal conflicts over resources and the role of the Socialist Group, splitting in 2005, and APF entered 'political and organisational crisis' (McKinley, 2012, pp. 14–16, 89-90).

There was recovery from 2006, but the problems recurred. If the start of APF showed the possibility and value of left cooperation, despite real differences, its evolution showed the disastrous situation that develops when democratic procedures, honest debate and political pluralism get circumvented.

Anarchists and left intersections after APF

The late 2000s saw a general decline of 'new social movements'. The Concerned Citizens' Forum collapsed 2004, APF in 2010. The Anti-Eviction Campaign and LPM went into serious decline: by 2014 the latter mainly existed in only one Soweto shack settlement, Protea South (Mtetwa, 2018). Only *Abahlali* expanded. A detailed analysis of the reasons falls outside of this paper: internal problems, increasing ESKOM and municipal sophistication in managing protests, and the hopes generated by Zuma all played a role in the decline (Runciman, 2015).

The Platformists were, of course, affected. A major blow was the capture of MCR by ANC supporters. State repression played its role here too. In September 2005, Nyalungu was arrested in Soweto for organizing under the slogan 'No Registration! No Vote!' Swazi ZACF activist 'MK' was jailed during a crackdown on the Swaziland Youth Congress; he later went on the run. In 2006, ZACF was falsely accused in the Swazi press of a bombing campaign (Magagula, 2006). Ongoing conflicts in APF, and the horrific 2008 wave of anti-immigrant attacks that swept South Africa – leading to 67 deaths – were demoralizing.

Again, there were internal challenges. The Platformists still worked at a relentless pace that took its toll. BMC/ ZACF withdrew from the APF secretariat and the Workers' Library to free up resources. But links to unions withered, and the pace never slowed. Some members were exhausted, others burnt out or disillusioned; there was a spate of resignations; Ramarope died in 2005; ABC collapsed; the Dlamini / Shesha group closed. The December 2007 congress, attended by South Africans and Swazis, dissolved the old collectives, creating a single unitary organization with task-based committees in an effort to streamline ZACF operations (ZACF Congress Minutes 1–2 December 2007). ABC was revived but separated from ZACF. The awkward multi-country structure was replaced with an autonomous, ZACF-allied Swaziland anarchist group.

This restructuring had some positive effects. ZACF, revived, continued to engage in social movements, including APF, publishing *Zabalaza News* bulletin from 2008, as well as *Zabalaza*. In May 2008, for example, it participated in APF meetings responding to the anti-immigrant pogroms, joining a major march by 'new social movements' and immigrants in downtown Johannesburg. It was a founder of the Coalition against Xenophobia that year, convened an Anti-Chauvinist Network, and helped organize protests at the infamous Lindela repatriation centre near Krugersdorp. It issued *Against Chauvinism, Against Nationalism* (ZACF, 2008a), and a joint statement with *Abahlali* and LPM, opposing repression of Brazil's *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* (AbM/LPM/

ZACF, 2008). In 2009, ZACF did solidarity work with *Abahlali*, then facing repression in Durban, including co-organizing a large protest march in Soweto, December, with LPM.

While ZACF remained involved in APF activities, including debates around elections (ZACF, 2010), its emphasis was increasingly on direct work with APF affiliates, and LPM. In 2008–2009, it ran RBFs in the Orange Farm and Protea South shack settlements, plus Sebokeng and Soweto. A ZACF study group in Protea South, Soweto, recruited members and supporters from LPM, where ZACF remained active until at least 2014, ZACF's Lekhetho Mtetwa a leading figure. Meanwhile, ZACF worked with autonomists, nationalists and others ('even a Trot or two') in a 2009 anti-election campaign, *NOPE!* (NOPE, 2009). ZACF rebuilt connections on the union front, engaging GIWUSA, and a local section of SACCAWU, also supporting COSATU's mass actions and general strike in August 2008 against massive ESKOM price hikes (ZACF, 2008b). COSATU at the time favoured a socialist movement that would 'draw on many forces in civil society': 'while we differ with some of the theoretical, strategy and tactics of the Troskyites and Anarcho-Syndicalists ... it will be folly to ignore some of their valuable critique' (Vavi, 2009).

ZACF was part of the 'Solidarity Committee' for a factory occupation at the Mine-Line works in 2010, led by the Metal, Electrical and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (MEWUSA), a small union where the DSM had real influence (Hattingh, 2011). At Wits, ZACF was in a Socialist Student Movement from 2004 – this included different currents, despite being DSM-linked. ZACF worked alongside autonomists, Trotskyists, liberals and others in efforts to organize Wits' outsourced workers, with some role in the Wits Workers Solidarity Committee (founded 2011). In August 2011, a ZACF member was one of three students suspended by management for 'Operation Litter': trashing Wits campus to frustrate scab labour used in a strike.

APF's collapse had then only limited effects on ZACF operations, as ZACF retained connections to surviving local affiliates, and other movements. In 2011, ZACF was a founder member of a new countrywide Democratic Left Front (DLF) intended to unite the left (Maisiri, 2014). This emerged out of a process that brought together anarchists, Trotskyists, former SACP activists, social movements and unions like GIWUSA.

However, DLF processes and political culture were worrying, noted ZACF's Jonathan Payn (2011); some of APF's worst problems reappeared. Around 2012, ZACF withdrew to focus elsewhere. For example, in 2013, ZACF militants from Benoni, Khutsong, Sebokeng and Soweto attended the National Assembly of the Unemployed in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown), a small town where ZACF has since grown. ZACF's March 2012 congress argued for a focus on popular education, elaborated at the April 2014 congress (ZACF Congress Minutes 3 March 2012, & 5 April 2014). The RBF model was developed into Anarchist Political Schools (or 'Proletarian Study Circles') from 2010, and an allied, student-based Inkululeko Anarchist Collective at Wits (2011), and a Tokologo African Anarchist Collective (2012) with activists from Khutsong, Sebokeng and Soweto, emerged from APSs – the latter producing *Tokoloko* (2013 onwards) (RF, 29 January 2018). Other ZACF people became involved in various spaces for popular, worker and union education. As in earlier years, a more thorough-going left fusion proved neither practical nor necessary. Repression, however, remained a reality: ZACF's Mtetwa was threatened in Protea South, and in October 2015 ANC people attacked ZACF's Bongani Maponyane and Pitso Mompe.

Conclusion

Interaction with the larger left has always been central to the WSF / BMC / ZACF tradition. This tradition did not aim to unite all self-identified anarchists, but to build a cadre-based anarchist

organization with shared politics that operated within working-class movements to foster counter-power and revolutionary counter-culture. The aim was not to build anarchist-only or anarchist-identified ‘social’ movements, like new anarcho-syndicalist unions, but to unite the largest possible number of people in struggle, and to promote the anarchist idea as effectively as possible in the working class. While the masses carry within themselves both the possibility of a new society, they also carry the deep imprint of the existing one (WSF, [1996], 1998a, pp. 7–10, 170–175): winning the battle of ideas is key.

The experience of southern African Platformists clearly shows cooperation on the left is possible, but does not require a denial or a dismissal of divisions. These are generally substantial rather than outdated or pointless, and in fact very *valuable*. Treating political differences as a problem can prefigure a politics that closes down discussion (McGregor, 2018b). A fuller left merger is neither possible nor needed, and must either lead to a vague or incoherent programme, or the imposition of one perspective, in the name of unity or rejecting dogma – hardly useful.

The constructive solution is simply to cooperate on concrete issues in mutually respectful engagement, outlining some general points of agreement without effacing real differences and always testing ideas in struggle – something done with success on numerous occasions as we have shown.

The threats to cooperation on the left are not difference as such – which enriches debate and analysis – but ingrained cultures of sectarianism, and habits of manipulation and deceit, which span the political spectrum, as the ZACF found in, for example, APF and DLF. Approaches that rest upon undemocratic means – including coercion, demagoguery and manipulation, and blind loyalties – simply cannot generate self-managed, democratic counter-power and libertarian communism.

The struggle for a revolutionary, libertarian left project is intrinsically the struggle for politically pluralist counter power; only this is truly anti-authoritarian and democratic. This requires the battle of ideas – but the battle of ideas also entails a battle for honesty, integrity, tolerance and respect for agreed procedures. The leadership of the anarchist idea is only meaningful if based on free acceptance. Therefore, southern African Platformists have championed democracy, debate and pluralism as *integral* parts of a prefigurative, bottom-up politics – and fought against behaviour that contradicts basic socialist and humanist values. Such unprincipled behaviour – which some think some sign of revolutionary skill or a hard-nosed militancy – has disrupted alliances, damaged movements and poisoned personal relationships. It is an expression of the worst elements of bourgeois and imperialist political culture, and cannot prefigure anything better.

Note

1. These dominant traditions, it is important to recognize, overlap in important ways. For example, ANC and SACP have been allied from the 1950s, the ANC profoundly influenced by SACP theory (Jara, 2013, pp. 260–261). COSATU identifies as ‘anchored in the congress [ANC] and Comintern tradition’ (Vavi, 2009). A useful distinction can be drawn between the larger ANC-centred ‘Congress’ movement – ANC, SACP and allied movements – and the ‘Congress left’ – that part of the Congress movement championing a socialist project. ANC – unlike SACP – is a broad church, and a multi-class party, within which opinions range from conservative, to liberal and radical; it has never formally adopted socialism nor Marxism, but includes supporters of both. Some organizations in the broad Congress movement, like COSATU, are on Congress left, others are not. The student movement SASCO defines itself as Marxist-Leninist (Nephawe, 2011, pp. 33–38), but the community-based SANCO speaks merely of people-centred development. The main breakaways from the ‘Congress’ movement – the populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF, formed 2013), the ultra-nationalist Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC, formed 1959), and the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA, formed 1987, expelled from COSATU in

2014, forming its own Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party in 2018) also draw on nationalism and Leninism. PAC was influenced by Maoism, and its Pan-Africanist Students Movement (PASMA) today endorses Marxism-Leninism. Outside Congress, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO, formed 1979), the main Black Consciousness body, adopted 'scientific socialism' at its founding.

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