

THE DEATH OF NEIL AGGETT: UNIONS AND POLITICS, THEN AND NOW

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On the morning of 27th November 1981 Neil Aggett was arrested in Johannesburg and taken to John Vorster Square. Seventy days later, 5th February 1982, he was dead. He was 28 years old. He was the first white person to die in detention.

It is a great honour to deliver the Second Annual Neil Aggett Labour Studies lecture. Why did Dr Neil Aggett, a medical doctor and organiser for the Food and Canning Workers Union, die in detention?

In her brilliant biography, *Death of an Idealist: In Search of Neil Aggett*, Beverley Naidoo suggests two scenarios.¹

Scenario One: Neil is murdered by his torturers in his cell and his body is then strung up to make it appear as suicide.

Scenario Two: He decides to take his own life. He had been under constant observation and interrogation for nearly seven weeks. He had been brought to the depths of despondency. But, in writing his first statement on 8th January, he had defied them. In the weeks that followed they broke him down, physically and mentally, but he was going to allow them no more satisfaction. He had worked out how to hang himself and he went about it dispassionately, as if he was preparing to operate on a patient. In his final hours he is wrestling back dominion over himself and who he is. He can, concludes Naidoo, accept philosophically his own death, whereas he could never have reconciled himself with being Whitehead's - his torturers' - pawn (Naidoo, 2012: 286).

Whichever scenario is closest to the truth, I believe the clue to his tragic death lies in the statements he wrote during these painful days of interrogation.

What did Neil write in his statement when his torturer, Lieutenant Stephan Whitehead, finally got him to put pen to paper? Asked by Whitehead to summarise his views on the ANC, he wrote: "I support the principles of the Freedom Charter as being a basis for a democratic non-racial society in

¹ I have relied a lot on Beverley Naidoo's book and private conversations with her, in my interpretation of Aggett.

South Africa, with one man, one vote. However, I am not a member of the ANC" (Aggett cited in Naidoo, 250).

Whitehead was puzzled by this formulation and did not believe him. For Whitehead, if you believe in the Freedom Charter you are a member of the ANC. He continued to interrogate him until he broke him.

As a point of departure in this lecture I want to raise two questions: firstly was Aggett a member of the ANC; secondly, why was Whitehead so determined to prove that he was? I will argue that what was taking place in that lonely cell goes to the heart of the dilemma that faced, and continues to face, the labour movement in South Africa - namely its relationship the ANC and the SACP.

Let me turn to the first question: Was Neil a member of the ANC? The answer is quite simple; no, he was not. Of course he supported the broad goals of the ANC but he was not a member. By member, Neil understood it to mean that he took instructions from the ANC. Later, under interrogation, he made it clear that he never took instructions from the ANC. His work was union work. He writes in his second statement:

"I never wrote reports for anyone about the Union's activities, and never received instructions from anyone to do this or that, apart from the reports that we sent half yearly to the National Executive Council (Aggett, cited in Naidoo: 279).

Whitehead was not satisfied with Neil's answers. He had kept Neil awake for some seventy hours. But Neil held his ground: "I have never been recruited, though I have communistic ideas. Never been a member of the ANC, SACP and SACTU. I associated myself with SACTU" (Aggett, cited in Naidoo: 271). His use of the word "communistic" reminds us of Whitehead's presence in the notes he scrawled during his long weekend of interrogation under torture between Thursday 25th and Sunday 28th January.

Whitehead was getting desperate. On Monday his fellow detainee, Auret van Heerden, was worried by the state of Neil's health. He says to a visitor, "I think they have broken Neil this weekend" (Naidoo: 273). Auret manages to speak to Neil that day. Neil whispers, "I have admitted having SACTU links. They forced me to admit that I am a communist". He starts to cry. "They just must not ask me any more questions" (Aggett, cited in Naidoo: 275).

Could it be at this point that Neil decides to take his own life? He feels vulnerable but is determined not to be, in Naidoo's words, a "pawn" in Whitehead's plans. In other words, he was not willing to give any more information to Whitehead for fear of incriminating his comrades and friends.

Why was it so important for Whitehead to establish that Neil was a member of the ANC? At one level, the answer is quite simple. If Whitehead could get Aggett to admit he was a member of the ANC, he would be guilty of a serious crime in terms of the Unlawful Organisations Act. But this does not

adequately explain the obsessive way in which Whitehead persisted in his interrogation of Aggett. To understand what was happening to Aggett we have to understand the mind of Whitehead and the battle of ideas that was taking place at that time.

In the wake of the 1973 strikes in Durban a non-racial trade union movement re-emerged after some decades of repression by the apartheid state. These unions presented a challenge not only to the state and employers but also to the dominant national democratic tradition in South Africa. These embryonic unions placed strong emphasis on building a cadre of shop stewards with deep roots in their workplaces and industry-wide organisation and bargaining. They were labelled by their critics in the SACP and the national democratic tradition as syndicalist in orientation or, later in the 1980s, as “workerist”.

This polarisation around two different approaches of trade unions to national liberation had led to two distinct narratives. The first, I will call the “continuity thesis”. They believed that these new unions - and the formation of COSATU in 1985 - was part of a seamless web from the formation of SACTU in 1955 to the present. For the “continuity thesis” these new unions were the heirs to SACTU and, therefore, part of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR). They mobilised the oppressed across class lines - around the demands of the Freedom Charter. They believed that South African society was a form of “colonialism of a special type” and needed to follow the path of the National Democratic Revolution.

However for those in the workerist tradition, the 1973 strikes represented a “rupture” from the National Democratic tradition. The establishment of the Federation of Trade Unions of South Africa (FOSATU), the “rupture thesis” argued, had given rise to a radical alternative political tradition. They opposed capitalism, argue Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt, while rejecting the Soviet model and Marxist-Leninism. “The Union-centred ‘working class movement’ was the key site for the creation, from below, of a new nation - a nation reconstituted by the working class, where workers’ control, in the broadest sense, was to be implemented” (Byrne, Ulrich and Van der Walt: 28). Alec Erwin, educational officer of FOSATU at the time, recently wrote:

The hallmark of the workerists was their emphasis on building factory-based organisation and developing a deeply layered worker leadership anchored in that factory-based organisation.... The manner in which these diverse social currents were managed was through the engagement of leadership cadres in the common cause of building national unions to advance the worker cause. The diversities had to be melded effectively to achieve this commonly supported greater objective. Stated in this way, it is the exact equivalent of nation building and therefore also at the centre of the National Question (Erwin: 19).

Neil Aggett was caught between these two narratives. On the one hand, he recognised the magnetic pull of the ANC and the need to link the workplace

to broader community and national struggles. On the other hand, he shared with the workerists a commitment to building strong workplace organisation.

This commitment to strong democratic worker organisation is captured later in his statement, when he says:

What are needed are democratic organisations that people are involved in and are controlled by the people themselves. This will bring about gradual change in all spheres of life. Without these democratic, open, legal organisations, there is no guarantee that the people will have any control of their destiny. Most people in this country, black and white, want to see change come about, but this will not be possible through the actions of just a few people, but only through open, mass organisations" (Aggett, cited in Naidoo: 250).

Whitehead, I would argue, was not aware of this distinction, a distinction between the old communist left and the new democratic left. Or, if he was aware of it, he believed they were all the same. For him, South Africa faced a total onslaught from the Soviet Union and Aggett was part of that.

But Aggett did not die in vain. His death was the trigger for the Unity talks that had been tentatively proposed earlier. In December 1985 COSATU was launched as a "historic compromise" between the two dominant political traditions - the national democratic tradition, mobilising around the Freedom Charter, and the workerist tradition of FOSATU with its emphasis on building strong shop floor structures.

It seemed for a moment as if the vexed labour question had been resolved through an equal partnership between COSATU and the ANC. But the issues raised in the interrogation of Neil Aggett are re-emerging today as a new national political elite grapples with a powerful and often intransigent labour movement. As popular struggles grow in the face of a lack of delivery on key socio-economic issues, the strategic compromise has begun to fall apart.

The Marikana massacre of 16th August 2012 triggered a wave of strikes across South Africa, culminating in an unprecedented uprising in the rural areas of the Western Cape. It also began a process of political realignment. The dramatic entry of the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) into Parliament was to become the most spectacular. But could the historic decision of NUMSA in December 2013 to withdraw its logistical support for the ANC, and its mandate to the union's leadership to form a United Front and Movement for Socialism, be of more long-term significance?

It certainly was the popular view on the left at the time (Satgar, 2014). The "NUMSA moment", one support group boldly proclaimed, "constitutes the beginning of the end for the ANC and its ambivalence towards neo-liberalism" (Democracy from Below, December 2013).

The expulsion of NUMSA from COSATU in November 2014, followed by the expulsion of Zwelinzima Vavi, the long-standing general-secretary, in March 2015 did not initially slow down enthusiasm for the NUMSA moment. But the outcome of the COSATU Special Congress in July 2015, where COSATU President Sidumo Dlamini seemed to win support from the carefully chosen delegates, has led to a more reflective mood. The launch of a rival pro-ANC metal union, the Liberated Metalworkers Union of South Africa (LIMUSA) further complicates the narrative. The postponement of the national launch of the United Front and on-going differences in strategy, is leading to a more sober assessment of the NUMSA moment.

Is Marikana and the “NUMSA moment” a turning point, the beginning of the “next liberation struggle” or does it mark the disintegration of a once powerful labour movement?

In response to the re-emergence of the idea of a workers’ party inside NUMSA, I conducted a survey with my colleague Mark Orkin of a large nationally representative sample of adults between February and March 2014 (Webster and Orkin, 2014). Surprisingly, a third of South African adults definitely thought that “a new political party, a workers’ or labour party, will assist with current problems facing SA”. (The proportion answering “probably not” or “definitely not” were 15% and 13%.)

In 2012, we asked a sample of COSATU shop stewards a more specific question: “If COSATU were to form a labour party and contest national elections, would you vote for such a party?” 65% said they would. In the 2014 survey, among the fully employed, 69% agreed with the question (30% said “definitely” and 39% said “maybe”).

NUMSA has approached the question of a workers’ party with caution. Following independence, trade unions in post-colonial Africa have tended initially to submit to the ruling party that drove the liberation struggle. But growing marginalisation led unions in countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe into opposition and the formation of a separate political party, which, in the case of Zambia’s Movement for Multiparty Democracy, won state power in elections.

However, there has generally been a low level of tolerance of political opposition in post-colonial Africa. Unlike established democracies, these new governments are engaged in the complex task of nation building. The result is a culture of “us” versus “them”, and union-backed oppositional parties have often been quickly labelled “counter-revolutionary” and “imperialist”. The union-backed Movement for Democratic Change soon became the focus of organised violence inflicted by the Zimbabwean state.

Could South Africa be a special case in post-colonial Africa? The existence of a relatively large industrial working class, strong civil society organisations and an independent trade union movement with a political culture of shop-floor democracy makes the survival of a workers’ party more likely.

What would the social base of such a party be? In the 2014, nationwide adult sample, 30% of the full-time or part-time employed would definitely support a workers' party, rising to 40% of the unemployed. The highest expression of "definite" support for the idea of a workers' party was among the black working poor, among those with household incomes of less than R8000 a month, of primary/secondary education, and in the main working age of 18-49. By contrast, the lowest expressed "definite" support for a workers' party was among whites, Indian and coloureds alike, with household incomes of more than R8000 a month, of tertiary education, among the oldest.

This survey question indicated the size of the potential support base, and broadly identified its likely class features. But what would the form and content of a working-class politics be in South Africa? Is it to involve a broad workers' party, along the lines of Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores, with links to working-class communities, academics and small farmers? Or is it to be a more traditional labour party along the lines of the UK Labour Party, with close ties with organised labour? Is it to be a revitalised Marxist-Leninist vanguard party, a mirror image of the SACP, or could it be the United Front (UF).

Designed to link unions to struggles in the community, a National Working Committee of the UF was established in December 2014. Although it still remains to be formally launched nationally it has an estimated two hundred and fifty loosely affiliated social justice and environmental justice affiliates. Of particular concern is climate change and the demand for eco-socialism. However, its political direction remains uncertain: should it be openly socialist, or a broad front similar to the United Democratic Front (UDF) of the eighties? Is it a step towards a workers' party or is it an autonomous body connecting a range of community-based organisations? Should it engage in electoral politics or should it remain at arms-length from party politics?

Importantly, the multiple of local-level militancy that emerged over the past decade is a fragmented militancy, different from the social movement unionism of the early to mid eighties. The link between the current township protests and NUMSA is tenuous. Indeed the high levels of unemployment in these communities - sometimes as high as 80% - has led to conflicts - and intensified violence - between the employed who are trying to maintain collective solidarity in a strike and those who want to go to work. This emerged most dramatically in the strikes on the platinum mines in Rustenburg. The coercive tactics used to maintain solidarity, described by Chinguno as a form of "violent solidarity", runs counter to the democratic traditions of labour (Chinguno, 2015: 178).

It is important to emphasise that the new initiatives, organisational forms and sources of power are emerging on the periphery of organised labour. The strikes at Marikana were not led by a union but were the product of the self-activity of labour, as Sinwell and Mbatha (2013: 32) argue:

The agency of workers, and more specifically the independent worker's committee, is arguably the key feature surrounding the event of the Marikana Massacre ... The committee at Marikana is important in understanding the strike wave along the Rustenburg Platinum Belt where these independent organisations emerged. Industrial sociology more generally has been dominated by investigations into formalised unions

Labour's dilemma in post-colonial countries is how to express its distinct working class politics in such a way that it does not have a confrontation with the state or alienate itself from those who continue to support the dominant national. Interestingly, the Ghana Trade Union Congress (GTUC) has chosen the path of non-alignment with any specific political party. It prefers to develop its own political demands, lobby for these demands and advise its members to vote for the party that supports the GTUC's programme. A similar approach has been adopted amongst informal worker organisations in India (Agarwala, 2013: 98). Informal worker movements, Agarwala demonstrates, are most successful when operating within electoral contexts where parties compete for mass votes from the poor. She calls this competitive populism. These informal worker organisations are not attached to a particular party nor do they espouse a specific political or economic ideology. In this way they have successfully organised informal workers. As one organiser observed:

The informal sector is entering into the previously formal sector, and the formal sector is being cut in size.... We cannot differentiate between formal and informal workers, because politicians only care about getting most votes (cited in Agarwala, 2013: 98).

We are entering a new kind of politics, what some have come to call the "politics of precarity" (Lee and Kofman, 2012). There is, as Jennifer Chun argues, a "growing interest in a new political subject of labour ... women, immigrants, people of color, low-paid service workers, precarious workers ... Groups that have been historically excluded from the moral and material boundaries of union membership" (Chun, 2012: 40).

Whether the left activists of the labour movement have the political imagination and energy to take advantage of this new terrain remains to be seen. What is clear is that the old labour order is no longer sustainable and building an alternative is going to require patient long-term organisational work.

Let me conclude:

I have suggested that the issues raised in the interrogation of Neil Aggett in 1981-1982 that led to his death in detention are re-emerging today in a different context. Neil's death helped draw the two traditions I have identified together in a historic compromise. It may be tempting to argue that what we need now is to patch up the divisions that have emerged and re-unite COSATU once again.

I believed that would be the best option but I have changed my mind. We have a rich tradition of labour politics in South Africa. We have entered a period of political realignment. Let's take advantage of our multiparty democracy and let the battle of ideas take place in the political marketplace. Let the Marxist-Leninists enter the electoral game and compete as the SACP in the forthcoming local elections. Let the social democrats form a labour party. Let those who do not want to enter parliamentary politics but want to strengthen links between unions and the community build a United Front. They can develop a working-class political programme, invite political parties to present their manifestos to their members and let the members decide which party to vote for.

Looking back, thirty-three years after Neil Aggett's death, I believe there are two lessons we can draw from Aggett's work and life : firstly, to encourage the different political traditions to openly compete in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forums. What he wrote in those painful final days of his life should guide us in the present:

What the workers and the people need are open democratic organisations in which they can participate (Aggett, cited in Naidoo: 251).

But secondly, and more importantly, in building a new labour movement let's draw on Neil's absolute abhorrence of corruption. Beverley Naidoo describes an incident in AFCWU where Neil is said to have remarked He said, 'Even if I, Neil, eat the workers' money, I must be disciplined' (cited in Naidoo, 2012: 140).

Internal corruption in the unions is today one of the most difficult challenges they face. Neil's commitment to strong workplace democracy is the best way of taking forward the memory of Neil Aggett.

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