

A REJOINDER TO VON HOLDT

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Von Holdt's assertions are many and diverse. Let me therefore use the space available to counter but two. The first is that workerism is responsible for 'the separation of unions from other popular organisation (which) weakened the trade unions as a political force, and weakened the popular movement as a whole'.

For a start this implies an extraordinarily narrow view of what constitutes the political. To have built a union movement in South Africa that was, by the end of the 1970s, not only the fastest growing in the world, but also one of the few expanding movements anywhere, is no mean achievement. Nor did this simply imply a shop-floor strength. It resulted in a major and possibly irreversible shift in the South African political economy in favour of workers and their families - a shift that has not even been eroded by the events of the last year, that has seen lesser movements crumble.

More significant still is his selective recall of history - a selectivity that is part of the populist mythology about the recent past, and a wilful collective amnesia. In particular he cites the '...manifest ability of the UDF and its affiliates to challenge state initiatives in the political arena - particularly the Tricameral Parliament...', contrasting this with the lack of political initiative on the part of the unions. He declares: 'For example, the shopfloor model offered very little guidance on how to challenge the government's initiative in introducing the Tricameral constitution'. No evidence is provided to back up this assertion - and this is not surprising, since it is plainly wrong.

As early as 1983 (according to Friedman, 1987:443 ff) FOSATU began to mobilise against government plans to introduce a new constitution. Shop stewards at over 500 factories approached management calling for opposition to the proposals. On the day of the referendum itself, tens of thousands of workers in FOSATU factories arrived at work wearing union badges urging a 'no' vote. The following year, in the Eastern Cape, NAAWU went house to house urging coloured members not to vote in the elections to 'their' house of parliament. Nor were these initiatives confined to the Tricameral parliament. It was FOSATU president, Chris Dlamini, who mobilised workers on the East Rand to take up issues in their communities. This is some of the evidence ignored by Von Holdt - ignored because it is at variance with his perspective.

The second assertion I would dispute is one that is implicit throughout this paper, but was explicit in an earlier version (Von Holdt, 1987) This is that relations between party and unions, although difficult at times, will so to speak be 'all right on the night'. Or, as his quotation from Mafumadi has it, that it will all '...depend on the balance of forces at the time of the seizure of power'. In his earlier paper, Von Holdt claims that despite theoretical problems about this relationship '...in political theory and practice elements of the solution have been found'. (1987:17) He then brings to his defence national struggles from Vietnam to El Salvador.

This grand gesture towards global politics is, however, only used as legitimation. No theory is advanced of just how party and unions might resolve their differences, might overcome the tensions that arise from the fact that their goals will tend to diverge since they mobilise different constituencies, for different ends. Von Holdt's view is one that assumes a linear progression of history in which the lessons that are learned are always the right ones, and the successes are always seized upon by the right faction.

Very different conclusions can be drawn from the kinds of examples that he cites. Post-colonial Africa is strewn with the bones of trade unions that allied themselves with nationalist movements to fight for the liberty of their people. The unhappy experience of the Zambian unions - once amongst the most powerful on the continent - is a case in point. Nor has the passing of time made relations easier - as workers in Jerry Rawling's Ghana could testify. Even unions operating in the relative freedom of Nigeria have repeatedly found themselves at odds with the state, and restricted in their operations. Closer to South Africa, the unions in Mozambique have been confined to a productionist role, and instructed that they are to be '...the arm of the Party for the organisation of the labouring classes.' (Plaut (1984):123) Is this the future Von Holdt sees for the South African movement?

Nor is the evidence more encouraging when one considers the situation in Eastern Europe. Anyone doubting this should consult the illuminating chapters on the trade union debate that took place in the Soviet Union, by one of the most respected scholars of the period - Neil Harding. It is his belief that the decisions of the early 1920's on these very questions were '...the crucial turning point in the history of the Russian Revolution'. (emphasis in the original) (Harding, 1983 :275) Harding's argument is long and complex, but in essence it is that the repression of trade union democracy led inexorably to the degeneration of democracy in the party itself, and finally to the appalling atrocities of Stalinism.

Such considerations are not of 'mere' academic interest. The events inside the South African unions, before and after the formation of Cosatu indicate that they are live issues that have to be faced. The debate around socialism and the splits in unions such as CCAWUSA, all have a bearing on the subject.

Von Holdt argues rightly that 'Nationalism is not simply a negative force'. Nor is it unambiguously a positive one. That is why FOSATU stated all those years ago that 'It is therefore essential that workers must strive to build their own powerful and effective organisation even whilst they are part of the wider popular struggle. The organisation is necessary to protect and further worker interests and to ensure that the popular movement is not hijacked by elements who will in the end have no option but to turn against their worker supporters' (Foster, 1982:77).

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