

Critical Comments on the article: “Platform of the Left Bloc In the Zuma Must Go Campaign” by Comrades Ahmed Jooma and Shaheen Khan

By John Appolis

In this article John Appolis argues that Jooma and Khan’s critique of the Popular Front and the dangers of the working class being led astray by monopoly capital and its adherents, they nevertheless advocate for the working class to be part of a front with a formation like Save SA. “The latter at best ignores the domination of the South African economy by monopoly capital, and overlooks the role played by both Zuma and Gordhan in entrenching this domination.”

The “Platform of the Left Bloc” is an important article which opens the space for a comradely debate on the strategy and tactics in relation to the orientation of the working class movement in the current political conjuncture.

However the tactical line in the paper is rather confusing. It shifts between advocating support for a front against state capture involving formations like Save SA and the formation of an independent working class mass based front.

Let’s capture this ambiguity:

Despite the comrades’ critique of the Popular Front and the dangers of the working class being led astray by monopoly capital and its adherents, one nevertheless gets the impression that they are advocating for the working class to be part of a front with a formation like Save SA. The latter at best ignores the domination of the South African economy by monopoly capital, and overlooks the role played by both Zuma and Gordhan in entrenching this domination. This may be an overly harsh assessment of the line of march advocated by the comrades but it seems to follow from what they wrote:

17. The Popular Front is the main strategic weapon of the bourgeoisie to tie the hands of the working class to the interests of the bosses. It represents a coalition of the proletariat and the imperialist bourgeoisie which imposes restrictions on the freedom of thought and action of the proletariat. All classes respond to an objective crisis and those affected by oppression enter the political arena. The anti-State Capture Movement has been organised largely by the Social Movements/NGO’s and parliamentary political parties. It has attracted various classes and ‘races’ to march against state capture; the white upper middle classes, the upper sections of the black petty bourgeois, the middle classes in general, the working class and poor have all joined the protests. The class character of these movements is not as important to ordinary people as the fact that they are ready to take up the fight practically and immediately.

18. The ever present danger of the working class and poor being led astray by White Monopoly Capital is real. Particularly where organizations of the proletariat remain outside the general movement and contemplate a pure proletarian response to the crisis. The reality of the situation is that the working class and its organizations have no choice but to enter the fray. This they cannot do apart and outside the general movement that has already been established. To attempt to organize a separate set of

marches would not only be confusing to the general population but would and could be divisive. (my emphasis)

According to the authors the forces and formations that are part of this movement are: the DA, EFF, SACP, Save SA and church leaders.

20. The task of the proletariat and its leadership is to join the general movement. However in doing so it enters the fray under its own program and banner. It applies the policy of the united front which is 'unity in action', March separately, Strike together!

Further the authors states that the only consideration for the working class is that these "potential allies" "struggle in action". Further "in participating in the movement the proletariat must insist on the formation of 'Committees of Action' in every locality"....."The line of demarcation between the these forces and the working class is established during the struggle itself". "When struggle is in question, every worker is worth ten bourgeois".

On the Formation of a mass-based united front this is what the authors have to say:

26. The SAFTU resolutions have raised the question of an urgent meeting to discuss 'What is to be done?' We fully support this call and want to suggest that such a meeting must go beyond the trade union movement and include all leftwing formations in the country; all the small left groupings, the Economic Freedom Fighters, Social Movements and NGO's, the student movement around #Feesmustfall and even the broader student movement, the #Outsourcingmustfall and Civic formations etc. The task would be to constitute a Left Bloc which would be a temporary unity of these different leftwing organizations/formations on a common platform. Such a platform could result in the formation of a real mass based united front drawing in the overwhelming masses of the working class and poor.

27. The Left Bloc must strive to build strong ward based 'Solidarity Action Committees' (SAC's) which are brought together in United Front Civic structures at local, regional, provincial and national levels.....

.....The coming struggles against state capture will catapult the working class into the forefront of the battle; it will need the immediate articulation of a working class program of action, the organisation of an independent working class contingent in the struggle and the acceleration of the formation of a Mass Workers Party. The formation of a Left Bloc on a common program of action is a necessary step in this regard....

On the one hand we have the agitation for a front with the mentioned forces based on *Committee of Actions* and on the other hand a United Front based on *Solidarity Action Committees* anchored by the trade unions.

This is confusing.

Where in lies the source of the confusion?

1. There is a conflation of the importance of struggling for the downfall of Zuma with participation in the current initiatives around this call. It seems to the comrades that the only way of engaging in this struggle is to enter the space of the existing initiatives of Save SA. However a distinction must be made between the importance of the struggle for Zuma to go and the current initiatives that are making this call. There is a difference. The working class can put as a central focus the demand for the fall of Zuma without necessarily entering the fray of Save SA. The comrades correctly criticized NUMSA's abstentionism in that the Union does not appreciate the significance of the struggle against Zuma. In the coming weeks NUMSA has to be engaged on the significance of the demand for Zuma to fall. And maybe the way to convince NUMSA is not to conflate the importance of the Zuma must fall struggle with how this struggle is to be undertaken and who one's potential allies are.

For the authors the only way to engage in this struggle is to enter the fray of Save SA and the DAs:

"..... This movement has in spite of the endorsement by White Monopoly Capital drawn large black working class, unemployed and middle classes to it. NUMSA has through its abstention isolated itself from these masses. It has also through its myopic insistence on a 'pure' class struggle lost sight of the need for immediate action to stop the Zupta's in their track. Instead of raising the proletarian program and fighting for this to become hegemonic in the anti-State Capture Movement, they have done nothing but comment on why they do not support the movement. NUMSA in spite of their best intentions has fallen victim to an ultra-left impulse".

2. A second shortcoming is the comrades' mistaken catastrophic view of the present state of class struggle, and because of this catastrophic view the working class must hasten in entering the fray of the existing anti-corruption movement. For them the current conjuncture is one of being on the precipice of revolution or counter-revolution and therefore the working class and poor must enter the fray otherwise events will overtake it.

11. What the Zuma government faces is no longer merely an 'objective' crisis of the economic system but a crisis of legitimacy which makes it the weakest link in the capitalist chain. This is important as it means we are headed for choppy waters and we could be witnessing the opening salvo of an Arab Spring like revolt. This could result in a revolutionary or counter-revolutionary situation developing in the near future. In this context it is the duty of revolutionaries to posit a Revolutionary Program of Action. To stand on the sidelines is criminal!

The ZUMA presidency is a Bonapartist one, doing a balancing act between two combatant and opposing class forces, and it is preparing the "ground forces in the form of the ANCYL and MKMVA as the incipient fascist movement. " Its main target will be the working class; an attempt to reverse it's hard fought for labour relation victories and breaks its organisations in the form of militant trade unionism"..... They are not afraid to protect the ruling party by dint of force. While other classes fear a growing fascist movement as it threatens their ideal of democratic constitutionalism,

the main danger is to the working class, as the historical role of fascism is to smash every last vestige of working class democracy, its policies and its organisations.¹ The failure to grasp this will result in a great historical defeat for the working class and open a new period where the fight for basic democratic rights may have to start all over again.

This catastrophic perspective of the present conjuncture prevents the comrades from having a more objective analysis of the state of affairs, especially the state of the working class and its formations. A more objective analysis of the state of the working class would have enabled the comrades to unpack the necessary tasks of the day and situate the struggle against Zuma within these tasks. In other words we must ask ourselves what are the key tasks of the day and how will the struggle against Zuma assist in the execution of these tasks.

Unfortunately this exercise is not undertaken by the comrades. There is a one-sided focus on the Zuma Regime and its crisis. Not to be mistaken, the characterization of the Zuma Administration is an important component in the analysis of the alignment of forces, but it is only one part. But even here the comrades' characterization of the Zuma Presidency as being Bonapartist is not really an appropriate one.

Having said that, what then?

There is agreement with the comrades that the abstentionist position of NUMSA is not an appropriate line of march in the present conjuncture. This abstentionist position of NUMSA is similar to the one adopted by them in 2015 when there was the removal of the then Finance Minister Nene.

What NUMSA has not fathomed is that the actions or inactions of individuals in history, especially presidents, are important precisely because they are expressions of the relation of forces. In our case the actions of Zuma gave us an insight into the peculiar alignment of class forces within our country. His actions are a product of this relation of forces. It is this relation of forces that informs a strategic line of march for progressive forces.

We know that Zuma came into the presidency supported by an alliance of class forces that had one thing in common: their hatred for Mbeki and his support for big bourgeoisie. The black petty bourgeoisie and the working class were the main victims of the neo-liberal onslaught of the Mbeki era. The bureaucratic black petty bourgeoisie, i.e. the local councillors, hated the Mbeki's policy of anti-corruption at the local level and his sanctioned legalised corruption at the top. The local petty bourgeoisie in the form of small business owner detested the lack of access to the feeding trough of the state. Mbeki and his clique were also resented by the white-collar workers who were being squeezed by the lack of career pathing in the state because of neo-liberal prescriptions. These were the various strata that came together in the Polokwane bloc and who are today still present in the ANC.

However the Zuma bloc of forces had no intention of radically transforming the structural hegemony of white monopoly capital, of dismantling neo-liberalism, of undoing the undemocratic and centralised features of the state of the Mbeki era. They merely continued

with the old neo-liberal policies of the Mbeki era. They disgracefully capitulated to the power of monopoly capital and accepted the policies and institutions of his predecessor, with the exception of the Scorpions. It is this capitulation that caused splits within the bloc – the formation of the EFF and the fall-out within COSATU. Sections started to feel that bowing to monopoly capital block their ability to accumulate and consume. Avenues for accumulation were drying up. The 2008 world economic recession also forced the state to rein in expenditure and projects, further cutting/limiting access to resources of the state. No wonder sections of the Zuma Bloc hate institutions like the Treasury as it is the patricians who apply the brakes on their access to the resources of the state. This is what Van Rooyen said in his statement as Minister of Finance for four days: "*We want to demystify some of the myths that are currently prevailing around the functionality of this important department, the National Treasury. Because in our take, National Treasury is the axis of our development agenda. It must be accessible.*"

Zuma is thus caught between these two class forces - the white big bourgeoisie and black petty bourgeoisie – and the conflict between them explains the zig-zagging of Zuma. Though they are in conflict both have a common interest in perpetuating capitalism. In this conflict the Zuma bloc represents no genuine democratic aspirations, it has no interest of addressing the needs of the masses. Its mission is simply to par-take in the process of primitive accumulation, of feeding at the trough of the state. And as Oupa articulates in his recent article, "*The Corruption of a Dream*", the Guptas brought a new dimension to the struggle of the aspirant black petty bourgeois to accumulate. They provided the means, the know-how and the resources to take on white monopoly capital and have dared to try to muscle the big bourgeoisie at its own game and in its backyard.

What should not however be discarded is that the Zuma Block is quite capable of making wild populist swings. In its desperation to cling to power, and to threaten the big bourgeoisie, the Zuma Bloc can turn to the masses and initiate reforms that can be very attractive to the masses in the hope of winning over their support. And this is where there is a difference with the authors, who see the trajectory of the Zuma bloc as only a right-wing movement. The Zuma Bloc precisely because of its petty bourgeoisie base is capable of making wild swings to the "left". But it can also easily find an accommodation with the bourgeoisie.

Further the characterization of the Zuma Administration as Bonapartist by the authors is meant to fit into their scenario of a rising right-wing fascist movement. Historically a Bonapartist president/presidency arises when there is a stalemate between the two main contending classes in society – the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Neither is able to inflict a decisive blow on the other. Hence the seemingly appearance of an autonomous presidency that is partly elevated above classes, acting independently of the classes. At some point the stalemate has to be broken, and for the big bourgeoisie fascism is the solution. A Bonapartist state is thus the forerunner of fascism in the absence of the working class taking the revolutionary initiative. From an assessment of the state of class struggle in our country it is evident that we have not yet reached this form of polarisation. The working class and poor is not yet in a position to impose its agenda and interests on the ruling class, and therefore the conditions for the emergence of Bonapartist presidency do not exist.

Enter the working class.....

The working class and its forces should enter this conflict with its own vision, strategy and demands. It should enter it against the big bourgeoisie and its system of accumulation by calling for Zuma to go. And this call is in line with the sentiments and mood of the masses.

It has found a resonance with them.

The recent massive marches throughout the country, especially in Tshwane and Cape Town, the show of force by the EFF and the call of COSATU for the resignation of Zuma and the booing of Zuma at the COSATU May Day Rallies, show that the call for Zuma's resignation has general support amongst the working class and middle classes. It has set in motion a general national movement.

As far back as 2013 already this call struck an accord with the working class. NUMSA at its Special National Congress in December 2013 demanded the immediate resignation of Zuma. This demand came in the context of an array of corruption scandals surrounding Zuma and his Administration's lack of transparency and attempts to hide the workings of the state from the Public- especially the attempt at the passing of the so-called Protection of Information Bill or Secrecy Bill. In the wake of the removal of the then Finance Minister Nene in December 2015 comrade Karl Cloete remarked in a Daily Maverick article that *"the middle and working-class people are rightly sickened by the scourge of corruption, cronyism, incompetence and the looting of the state, which they see as being personified by the President himself"*. Again in July 2016 the United Front advanced the #ZumaMustFall call. This time around the context was one in which there was a general call to take action against corruption, especially the cover up around Nkandla.

It is important to unpack why there is this resonance amongst the masses for Zuma's resignation as this will inform the demands and tactics. The support of the masses is premised on the understanding that Zuma and his cronies are stealing the fruits of their struggles, both material and democratic. Before its eyes its democratic conquests are being hallowed out: it elects a democratic government on the basis of its majority – only for the democratic government to become beholden to the interests of a minority and for the elected to turn into looters of the coffers of public assets and into oppressors of the electors. Zuma's actions were entrenching the erosion of democracy and were placing at the disposal of the consuming petty bourgeoisie the resources of the state. Politically the working class is supporting this call as a means of fighting corruption, of defending the resources of the state which are the collective inheritance and creation of the masses, and of reclaiming democracy which is part of its conquests.

What then is the line of march?

The starting point to determine the tactical line of march is the state of the working class movement. Despite the general support for Zuma to go amongst the masses and despite the thousands of struggles and hundreds of different organisations of the working class and poor – the working class movement exhibits numerous weaknesses – organisationally, politically and ideologically. It is marked by fragmentation, low levels of mass implantation and has a very disperse advance guard who are caught up in the immediacy of its issues. There exists no real national presence. The trade unions are only now in the beginning phase of shaking off the effects of years of false politics, bureaucracy and inertia. Legalism and an excessive

emphasis on an industrial relations' approach to class struggle seems to still frame its politics and methodologies. Its social base is not as yet at the cutting edge of anchoring a mass movement. NUMSA/SAFTU have so far express some correct sentiments but have a way to go.

Now the struggle for Zuma to go presents an opportunity and means to address these shortcomings of the working class movement. It provides the opportunity to have a national focus for the various concrete struggles of the working class. The struggle for Zuma to fall is thus an important immediate struggle. This demand could centralise the contradictions of the neo-liberal project, reflects the unravelling of the hegemony of the ANC, and expresses the anger and frustrations of the working class and poor. For the past 15 years or so the working class and poor have been engaging in many anti-corruption struggles – and are continuing up to day to do so. Outsourcing Must Fall Movement is at the cutting edge of the anti-corruption struggles in the State-owned enterprises where the consuming petty bourgeoisie are fleecing the working class through corrupt and parasitical tenders. The thousands and thousands of service delivery protests are coming up against pervasive corruption at local government level. In the mining areas mining communities are battling big mining companies and their corrupt elites from dispossessing them through corrupt BEE deals. And there are many more.

What has been missing is that these struggles remain confined to their specific area and battleground, imposed by the necessity of their immediacy. The pressure to achieve immediate relief which is vital for the survival of the constituency subjects these struggles to a continuous process of ebb and flow. This causes a great deal of discontinuity in the formation of an activist cadre. What the demand for Zuma to go offers is an opportunity to unite these struggles, give them a national expression and a connection to a common national cause. The present conjuncture requires this qualitative shift in the struggles of the working class. And the Zuma must go provides the basis to effect such a qualitative shift.

The unification of these struggles on a national basis will not amount to an artificial manoeuvre. Rather it will organically weave together the thousands of different struggles of the masses into a national stream. This will place the working class in a position to articulate an alternative ideological and political explanation of the political economy of corruption, of the class character of the ANC and its factions, of the nature of the South African social formation and the position of white monopoly capital therein. In doing so the working class will counter the narratives of the big bourgeoisie and the Zuma Bloc. It will not only enter the battle for ideas and public opinion but also come to know who is friend and foe.

In this organic way a nation-wide cadre of militants can coalesce around a common set of perspectives and tasks which will put in place the foundation for a truly national working class movement to emerge that can meet the convulsions that are surely to come in the near future. It will hopefully break the cycle of discontinuity in the formation of an activist cadre. This coalescing and cohering of a nation-wide cadre of militants with their thousands of connections with the concrete struggles of the masses is the key task of the moment. This is the key to unlock the class struggle in our country as it will herald a new qualitative shift in the balance of class relations in our country.

As the authors of the Left Bloc says:

25.*This fight is not about whom we want in Zuma's place, because we do not have the power to determine that at this stage. Instead it is our task to mobilize the organised strength of the working class and progressive forces so that whoever does replace Zuma will know there is a growing force of the working class that is ready to protect its most basic positions it won through hard class struggle. A defensive struggle can lead to an offensive position as the struggle unfolds. The shield turns to a spear!!*

Where to start?

The starting point is to convene a National Assembly of Representatives of the Struggling Formations of the Working Class, especially those at the cutting edge of the anti-corruption struggles, for instance Outsourcing Must Fall movement, Abahlali Freedom Park, Housing Assembly, Tembelihle Crisis Committee, SECC, Black Sash, R2K and many others. It is these formations that must anchor the movement against the Zuma Bloc and white monopoly capital. The coalescing of these formations on a national scale with clarified class perspectives on the political economy of corruption and crystalizing around a common set of demands shall enable the working class to make its presence and imprint felt on the national anti-corruption movement. NUMSA and SAFTU are to be engaged to be part of this initiative. At some point overtures should also be made towards COSATU to come on board.

The crystallization of such a national cohering working class initiative will mark a turning point in class relations in our country. It will place the working class and poor in a position to engage the other sections of its brethren who are part of the EFF and DA, and the progressive components of the middle class, and become a poll of attraction to them.

In the absence of such an initiative the working class and poor will continue to be the cannon-fodder and foot-soldiers of class forces that stand in direct contradiction to its fundamental interests.

(John Appolis – May 2017)

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