

Elijah Barayi, the NUM, and the narrative of organisation

Elijah Barayi was born in 1930 in the town of Cradock, in what is now the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. He matriculated in 1951 from Healdtown, a well-known Methodist educational institution first established in 1845.

Barayi joined the ANC Youth League in the 1940s and he took part in the Defiance (Against Unjust Laws) Campaign of the ANC that was started as a consequence of the banning of the Communist Party (CPSA) in 1950.

By the time of the banning of the ANC (following the Sharpeville Massacre) in 1960, Elijah Barayi was already a very experienced cadre, working as a clerk on a mine in Brakpan, East Rand and organising for the ANC. He was detained for six months during the State of Emergency that followed Sharpeville.

In May, 1973 Barayi moved to Carletonville on the West Rand. On September the 11th 1973 (the same day as the Pinochet coup in Chile) 11 striking black mineworkers were shot dead, an incident known as the Carletonville Massacre.

In those days the Anglo American company, born out of financial consolidation in the early 20th century, was dominant in the industry, and the employers' principle instrument, as now, was the Chamber of Mines.

In 1979 the Wiehahn Commission recommended recognition of black trade unions.

In 1982 the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) was formed with Cyril Ramaphosa as its first General Secretary and Elijah Barayi as its Vice-President.

In 1983 the Chamber of Mines recognised the NUM as a collective bargaining interlocutor.

In December, 1985 COSATU was formed, based largely on the power of the NUM,

with Elijah Barayi as its first President, a position he held until 1991. Barayi passed away in 1994. COSATU still reveres him, above anyone else, as its historical father.

At the time of the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP in February, 1990, COSATU had a total membership of about (subject to checking) 800,000 members organised inside the country, about a third of whom were in the NUM, which remains COSATU's biggest constituent up to now.

The ANC had by then been banned for 30 years and the SACP for 40 years, so that they had no members organised in open, legal branches inside the country.

By the way, South Africa is a large country, with a population of about 50 million as of now (October 2012).

By the time of its 11th Congress, last month, which I attended as a delegate, COSATU had 2.2 million members organised in 20 affiliated unions. This in a national workforce, depending on definition, of 10 to 13 million employed people.

The SACP, at its 13th Congress in July 2012, announced its membership as 160,000, with an intention to raise this to 500,000, equivalent to one in a hundred of the total population. This would be a sufficient number to ensure an organised presence in each voting district, and therefore to be able to formally constitute the National Democratic Alliance, together with its other components, at that basic level. With the SACP, these are the liberation movement (ANC), the union movement (COSATU), and SANCO, which is the "civics" movement, a historic formation that still has life and meaning and a useful role to play.

The ANC, a couple of weeks ago, at its audit for the purpose of its 53rd (and Centenary) National Conference (due to take place in Mangaung in December) announced that its total membership is currently 1.2 million.

After the ANC, the NUM remains the biggest single democratic individual-membership organisation in the country, with around 300,000 members.

South Africa's first majority-rule election took place in 1994. It did not change the dominant relations of production or the general class character of the state in the country. Unless things are done, constitutional democracy will normally revert to bourgeois-democratic dictatorship.

Without the existence and constant extension of the mass democratic movement and general organs of people's power, there will be no prospect of further advance. Progress will constantly be postponed as one capitalist crisis follows another, as

happens in all bourgeois countries.

The reverse side of this equation, as seen from the point of view of the bourgeoisie and its supporters, is that the mass democratic movement must be broken, the alliance of its main components must be broken, and the democratic life of the country cut back to the national electoral process, mediated by the mass media that they control.

Only then will the whole bourgeoisie begin to feel that South Africa has been made safe for capitalism, according to its own lights. Of course, this is a mistake. The biggest threat to South African capitalism is capitalist Imperialism, with its financial terrorists, its sanctions, its drones and its no-fly zones.

The membership figures can help people to get an idea of the way things stack up in South Africa. But narrative reference to the likes of Elijah Barayi are just as necessary in any full account. Communists and non-communists in “the movement” have made it what it is through the common conviction that mass democratic organisation is indispensable. Our history, for us, makes the point much more powerfully than the numbers ever could.

Numbers do have to be increased to the point where organisation stretches evenly from border to border (i.e. is national) and is as strong at the base as it is at the centre (revolutionary, or potentially so).

Other mass formations are needed, and most particularly, in my opinion, a general, democratic, mass-individual-membership organisation for women is urgently needed as a component of the alliance of equal status with the others.

Organs of people’s power will ensure that the slogan “Power to the People” can continue to have real meaning.

The operative part of the National Democratic Revolution is the word “democratic”, because democracy is how the people’s collective agency is found.

Going beyond that point will require the invention of new relations of production, a world-historical task of which South Africa has to be a major part, if not the main leader.

Dominic Tweedie, 15 October 2012

