'Does 'the NUMSA moment' prefigure a regeneration of transformative politics? Or will it encourage the ANC to resort to defensive nationalism and authoritarian populism? The extraordinary importance of Beresford's analysis extends well beyond South Africa. It will become required reading by all those concerned with the prospects for organised labour in the global South.'
— Roger Southall, Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

'If you are interested seriously in 'the NUMSA moment' and its context in the complex web of South African politics, read this book now – but don't expect another romantic overture to a clear class and ideological break from today's contradictions.'
— David Moore, Professor of Development Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

'South African trade unions today are ruptured by political divisions and the ANC led alliance is divided. Beresford's book offers important fresh perceptions about the fragmentation of the labour movement as well as the possibilities of a new kind of class politics in South Africa.'
— Tom Lodge, Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Limerick, Ireland

South Africa's long road to political freedom reflects only a partial freedom and an unfinished project of liberation. The country remains one of the most unequal on earth and is experiencing unprecedented levels of protest and industrial action. South Africa's powerful and globally revered trade unions are currently playing a central role in what are the most significant political upheavals since the transition to democracy. The alliance between the unions and the ruling African National Congress (ANC) is in crisis, while the unions themselves are beset by violent internecine infighting that threatens to tear the labour movement apart. The unions therefore stand at an organisational and political crossroads. Which path they take bears huge significance for South Africa's future, as well as how we understand the role that trade unions can play in global struggles for social justice in the era of neoliberal globalisation. Through original ethnographic insights this book investigates which political direction South Africa is moving in at this pivotal moment in the country's history. It contributes to the African Studies and Political Science scholarship on nationalist movements and African trade unions, while also offering new perspectives on labour activism and the strategic dilemmas confronting leftist movements on a global scale.

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South Africa’s Political Crisis

Unfinished Liberation and Fractured Class Struggles

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To Peter,

I hope you enjoy reading my first book!

I look forward to seeing you soon in Jo’burg.

[Signature]

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1
Liberation’s Dream Deferred

In August 2012, 34 striking mineworkers were shot dead by police at the Lonmin mine in Marikana. The event drew global attention to South Africa and the gross inequalities and social injustice that continue to blight the country’s fledgling democracy just 20 years after apartheid. According to Desmond Tutu (2012), the event reflected how

unhealed wounds and divisions from South Africa’s past fatally combined with the reigning climate of political intolerance to trigger the appalling events. . . . As a country, we are failing to build on the foundations of magnanimity, caring, pride and hope embodied in the presidency of our extraordinary Tata Nelson Mandela. We have created a small handful of mega-rich beneficiaries of a black economic empowerment policy while spectacularly failing to narrow the gap in living standards between rich and poor South Africans.

The events at Marikana have thus generated a broader discussion about inequality and poverty in South Africa, contributing to a period of national introspection that has continued since the death of Nelson Mandela in December 2013. The massacre of these mineworkers has also featured in global debates about social justice. Thomas Piketty (2014: 39), for example, begins the first chapter of his ground-breaking book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* referring to this incident. He argued that the dispute at Marikana over wages that led to the massacre reflected a ‘distributional conflict’ concerning, more broadly, the issues relating to the uneven distribution of wealth in the global economy.

At the heart of these debates rests the political position of workers and the potential role that trade unions can play in securing a more egalitarian and just world order. Indeed, unions have been at the centre
of resistance to neoliberal austerity in the wake of the global financial crisis, arguing that it should be capital, and not labour, that shoulders the cost of this latest crisis of capitalism. However, they have done so on a defensive footing, resisting, as best they can, this latest neoliberal offensive against people's livelihoods. To an extent, this reflects the manner in which trade unions in particular have been beating a long retreat in the era of neoliberal globalisation. In the face of the structural power of capital, unions in the most advanced capitalist societies have been forced to struggle— as best they can— to secure what remains of the postwar 'class compromises' won generations before them. Labour scholars have therefore questioned how it might be possible to reverse this decline and reinvigorate the organisational and political power of the trade unions to enable them to join a global 'movement of movements' promoting alternatives to neoliberal globalisation (Moody 1997; Waterman 2001).

South Africa's union movement is looked upon with envy by its counterparts in the advanced capitalist societies. Famed for its militancy and its dogged resistance to the old apartheid regime, leading labour scholars like Kim Moody (1997) have implored Western trade unions to 'look south' for their inspiration and means of regeneration. But what lessons can we learn from South Africa's transition to democracy and the current state of South Africa's labour struggles?

A dream deferred: the transition to democracy

The title of Mark Gevisser's biography of former South African president Thabo Mbeki, *A Dream Deferred*, refers to a Langston Hughes poem Mbeki quoted before the South African Parliament in 1998. "What happens to a dream deferred?" he asked the parliament, to which he offered the simple answer, 'it explodes' (Gevisser 2007: xxxi). This short passage reflected Mbeki's angst about the future of South African society if the dreams of a better life held by the newly enfranchised black majority were deferred, rather than realised.

Mbeki posed perhaps the most poignant question concerning the future direction of South African politics. On the one hand, the African National Congress (ANC) has achieved a great deal since it came into power in 1994 despite the fact that its capacity to enact social transformation from the Union Buildings of Pretoria was fundamentally circumscribed by the legacies of centuries of colonialism and apartheid. First, the socioeconomic legacies were fierce: the unemployment, poverty, crime, corruption and intercommunal violence that threatened to
plunge the country into civil war were just one part of this debilitating and toxic inheritance. Second, the means to address this great plethora of problems were severely limited. The ANC cadres returning from exile and prison quite simply lacked the capacity to enact radical redress for centuries of colonial injustice. Furthermore, the state itself which the ANC inherited had historically been geared towards channeling wealth, opportunity and prosperity towards the white racial minority, while simultaneously maintaining a large coercive capacity to suppress black challenges to its power. As a result, the apartheid regime had become a global pariah and experienced international sanctions and boycotts that had brought economic growth from the late 1970s onwards to a near standstill. The apartheid regime had amassed huge debts – notably through its military campaigns of ‘destabilisation’ across the Southern African region – and the ANC was confronted with a ‘junk bond’ credit status which severely inhibited the capacity of the South African state to service the apartheid debt and to borrow in order to expand the capacity of the state. The new ANC government was therefore desperate to improve its credit rating and to intensify South Africa’s integration into the global economy following decades of international sanctions and boycotts. This was deemed essential to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country that could encourage the economic growth that it hoped would in turn generate employment and gradually increase state revenues. In some respects, then, the ANC has been successful since 1994. South Africa has achieved steady GDP growth rates since 1994 and the overall GDP has more than doubled since the ANC came to power. Access to basic services, such as water and electricity, is improving, and more than 16 million South Africans now have access to social welfare, a provision that makes South Africa an exceptional example in welfare provision amongst its African neighbours (Seekings 2002). This has contributed to a decline in grinding poverty (Paton 2014) and gradual improvements to South Africa’s Human Development Index (UN 2011).

On the other hand, however, unemployment rates are conservatively estimated to hover around 25 per cent and remain among the highest in the world (Statistics South Africa 2013). The long-term roots of this have not been addressed since 1994 (Bhorat 2004). By some measures poverty has also become more entrenched among sections of the South African population (Allber 2003; Carter and May 1999; Leibbrandt et al. 2001) and it remains one of the most unequal countries on earth (World Bank 2014). Perhaps most damning for the ANC is that income inequality, like unemployment, has risen since 1994. Despite some achievements in the field of service provision mentioned above, the government has faced great
difficulty in meeting its own targets for service delivery (Hemson and O’Donovan 2006). This leads Southall to the conclusion that: ‘Triumphs there are and have been, but... something is clearly drastically wrong—raising the question of whether, despite the government’s best intentions, the African National Congress’s state is more dysfunctional than developmental’ (Southall 2007: 2). A great deal of these problems relate to state incapacity, but commentators have also pointed out that conscious political decisions—such as the introduction of user fees for basic services—have further entrenched poverty and inequality (see McDonald and Pape 2002).

Patrick Bond (2000) argues that the political transition in 1994 was merely an ‘elite transition’, replacing the old racial order with a new ‘class apartheid’. It is a view shared, in one way or another, by other prominent scholars (Alexander 2002; Marais 1998, 2011; Saul 2005). Since the start of the twenty-first century South Africa has witnessed levels of industrial action and township unrest that are unprecedented in the post-apartheid era, as frustrations over the slow pace of economic transformation, persistent unemployment, inequality and slow service delivery have spilled over into protests and other forms of direct action (see Ballard et al. 2006; Death 2010; Desai 2002; Gibson 2011; Legassick 2007). South Africa now has more protests recorded every year per capita than anywhere else, making it the ‘protest capital of the world’ (Alexander 2012). Such struggles are extremely heterogenous in their nature: while some are led by organised sections of civil society, including South Africa’s powerful trade unions and burgeoning social movements, others reflect more spontaneous uprisings of communities and workers against local authorities, councillors, employers and the police, which have been mobilised independently of established civil society formations (Alexander 2010).

Perhaps this escalation of protests reflects the ‘explosion’ Mbeki feared and, ultimately, the failure of the ANC government to realise the dreams ordinary South Africans hold of a better life after apartheid. Indeed, the party’s recent policy discussion document, The Second Transition, highlights not only ‘the far-reaching achievements of political liberation and democratisation’ but also the ‘concern about the lack of commensurate progress in liberation from socio-economic bondage’ and the ‘resilient fault lines’ of class, racial and gender inequality that ‘might have the potential to undermine and soon reverse the progress made’ (ANC 2012b: 8).

Therefore, while the ANC government inherited a state in 1994 that was grossly underequipped for the radical project of social transformation
that the nation required, this cannot shield the party from criticism of the conscious ideological positions it has taken. But why did this government, formed by a party with strong social-democratic credentials (and also long-standing socialist sympathies), embrace the basic tenets of neoliberal macroeconomic orthodoxy?

The awkward embrace of neoliberalism

The ANC had been unclear about its economic policies during its period in exile, and, despite the radical rhetoric of the Freedom Charter, prominent leaders such as Mandela were at best extremely uncertain and ‘wobbly’ in their commitment to a more radical left-wing agenda (Freund 2013: 520; Hirsch 2005: 42). Some ANC leaders, such as Thabo Mbeki, had already begun to shift towards a more business-friendly posture after their early exposure to the investor community during negotiations in the 1980s (Freund 2013). One should also not underestimate the intensity of the ideological onslaught on senior ANC leaders returning from exile or being released from prison in the early 1990s (see Bond 2000). The ANC’s engagements with global financial institutions in the early 1990s had a significant bearing on the party leadership’s thinking and Segatti and Pons-Vignon (2013) detail the significant ‘ideological conversion’ of several key ANC figures during this period. Mandela, for example, was widely chastised by the global investor community after declaring that the ‘nationalization of the mines, banks and monopolies is the policy of the ANC, and a change or modification of our views in this regard inconceivable’ (see Peet 2002). Freund (2013: 526) claims that Mandela quickly realigned his economic views with left-of-centre Western parties in the years following his release from prison, and along with Thabo Mbeki, Trevor Manuel and Alec Erwin, Mandela’s government subsequently led the transition to the neoliberal Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme in 1995. Mandela closed down the space for opposition to emerge within the ANC and among its left-wing allies (including the trade unions) by declaring GEAR a necessity, and that its content was ‘non-negotiable’ (Buhlungu 2005). As Peet (2002: 79) concluded with regard to the power of neoliberal economists: ‘What the terror on Robben Island could not do to Mandela, the Davos culture could.’

ANC elites like Mandela ultimately felt under considerable pressure to adopt an orthodox, neoliberal macroeconomic policy due to the structural imbalances of power in the global economy. This is not without good reason: the ANC came to office at a time when the power of nation
states was being circumscribed by the power of large, globally connected sections of capital (Robinson 2004; Sklair 2000). In this context, ANC elites were mindful of the severe weakness of the economy which they inherited from the apartheid regime and were afraid that not being seen to be a ‘disciplined’ business-friendly government-in-waiting could trigger a lack of confidence among the investor community (both national and transnational) leading to a lack of investment, credit rating downgrades and capital flight (Fine 2012; Williams and Taylor 2000). This forced Mandela and other ANC leaders to cultivate a ‘moderate’ political identity as part of what Bayart (2000) would call a ‘strategy of extraversion’ – an outward show of self-discipline to the investor community as a means to attract vital resources in a context of extremely unequal global power and economic dependency. In the South African case, adapting the appearance of a moderate and self-disciplined party keen to embrace neoliberal orthodoxy allowed ANC elites to appeal to a nervous and twitchy international investor community, whose resources the new government was keen to attract (Beresford 2014).

This reflected a form of what Stephen Gill (2003) has called ‘disciplinary neoliberalism’, where the structural power of capital and its powers to survey investment conditions around the world gives it an extraordinary disciplinary power to make sure national governments strive to provide the most attractive conditions for capital accumulation. While Segarti and Pons-Vignon (2013: 544) are right to point out how such fears were instrumentally played upon by the neoliberal factions of the ANC elite to consolidate their own positions, it is undoubted that the fear of losing business confidence was very real during this period and continues to constrain the actions of ANC leaders today. As Bond (2003: 135) argues, this attitude is summed up by the reluctant sentiment echoing among some ANC elites at the time that ‘globalisation made me do it’.

In recent years, the ANC’s discussion documents have adapted a more radical posturing vis-à-vis economic transformation which, for example, deide the neoliberal origins of GEAR and dismiss the programme as a ‘tactical detour’ (ANC 2012b: 12). However, the ANC’s left-wing allies have been critical of the manner in which such rhetoric has not translated into significant policy change. Furthermore, the apologetic tone evident in ANC discussion documents about the embrace of conservative macroeconomic fundamentals also obscures the manner in which the ‘crony capitalist’ accumulation of some ANC elites relies upon a friendly business climate as well, of course, as upon political connections to the corridors of power (Beresford 2015; Southall forthcoming).
Ultimately, then, the awkward embrace of neoliberalism by successive ANC governments has achieved mixed results. The inequalities and social injustice that remain the pervading feature of South African society therefore reflect the manner in which the long walk to political freedom may have been accomplished, but this is only a part freedom, reflecting an unfinished liberation.

Towards a post-nationalist era?

Patrick Bond argues that the failure of national liberation movements in Southern Africa to bring about the socioeconomic redress expected after white minority rule renders their nationalist appeals increasingly hollow or ‘exhausted’ (2000). Bond has argued more recently that in the wake of Marikana we can witness a ‘degenerative’ ANC elite selfishly pursuing its own interests, often at the expense of the constituencies it claims to represent. As a result, he claims, we can once again witness the ANC’s ‘exhausted nationalism’ unravelling because ‘underneath the ruling party’s apparent popularity, the society is seething with fury’ at the lack of socioeconomic redistribution (2014).

Bond (2000: 250; see also 2003: 45) argues that this could lead to a ‘post-nationalist’ politics emerging. Indeed, left-wing analysts predict the rise of ‘the next liberation struggle’ (Saul 2005), characterised by a struggle of ‘the poors’ (Desai 2002). Neville Alexander argues in this regard that ‘South Africans will eventually be forced away from race-centred politics of black (or African) nationalism to the centrality of class politics’ (2002: 182). In this vein, Saul (2005: 239) notes that the ‘stark contradiction between the ANC leadership’s chosen socio-economic priorities and the felt needs of the masses is giving rise to real tensions that have begun to stoke the fires of a new mass resistance to neo-liberalism in South Africa’. A common theme of this literature, then, is that the defining feature of politics in the future will be the emergence of a class-based politics which could one day challenge the ANC’s ‘exhausted’ nationalist project – an exhaustion reflecting the experience of other liberation movements in power across the region (Southall 2013).

The role that South Africa’s trade unions might play in these new political struggles, however, remains unclear. Given the centrality of trade unions in many of the political struggles against colonialism, authoritarianism and neoliberalism across Africa (see Beckman and Sachikonye 2010; Kraus 2007), the important role they continue to play in political developments in neighbouring countries (Larmer 2006; Matombo and Sachikonye 2010; Raftopoulos and Sachikonye 2001) and
the fact that the trade unions represent the largest and most organised section of South African civil society, it can be argued that a new class-based politics will find little traction without their involvement. Indeed, the trade unions are believed to hold the key not only to galvanising a new class politics in South Africa, they are also lauded as a labour movements in other parts of the world to follow in their struggles against neoliberal globalisation. This stems from the pivotal role that the largest trade union federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), played in the struggle against apartheid: it was a role made possible by an adherence to what Webster (1988) identified as ‘Social Movement Unionism’ (SMU), combining deeply embedded traditions of democratic shop floor organisation (which encouraged rank-and-file militancy) and engagement in a broader political struggle to overcome apartheid in alliance with other social movements (Baskin 1991; Buhlangu 2004; Friedman 1987; Sledman 1994; Wood 2003). This won the labour movement global acclaim, and academics heralded South Africa’s unions’ virtuous commitment to democratic organisation, membership participation, linkages with civil society and broader social/political goals as a model of unionism that could be replicated elsewhere in an effort to regenerate labour moments in the north in particular (Clawson 2003; Moody 1997; Waterman 2001). Moody (1997: 201–227), for example, implores northern unions to ‘look south’ to the example of SMU offered by unions in Brazil and South Africa who, Moody argues, have retained a ‘solid class outlook’ in their political organisation.

But are South Africa’s unions in a position to lead a new left-wing politics informed by such a ‘solid class outlook’? This book will offer an insight into these debates, drawing on a detailed study of the political strategy of South Africa’s trade union movement. I will set out the argument of this book below, but first we need some historical context to what will be discussed below as a potentially climatic moment in South African politics.

A brief history of the Alliance

It is important to understand current debates concerning the future of the Tripartite Alliance between the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP) and COSATU within the broader historical context of the relationship between South African trade unions and the liberation movements in the late twentieth century. Attempts to organise African workers from the 1920s encountered severe difficulties, although these efforts – led largely by the Communist Party of South Africa (as it
was then called) – eventually paved the way for the formation of the first non-racial union federation, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), in 1955 (Luckhardt and Wall 1980). Rather than being restricted to factory-level organisation, SACTU was formally aligned with the ANC and in this sense it continued the ‘political tradition’ developed by the black trade unions organised by the Communist Party in earlier decades (Southall and Webster 2010: 135–137). However, while this political involvement raised the profile of the federation, helping to facilitate its rapid growth (Lambert 1985), Southall and Webster (2010: 136) point out that this also brought SACTU into direct conflict with the apartheid state and that as a result of the repression it faced, the federation was forced into exile in 1964.

With SACTU exiled, the trade unions were left debating the strategic merit of having alliances with the exiled liberation movements. In many ways this reflected long-standing debates within the trade union movement across the world about whether a union’s primary responsibility is to its members in the workplace or whether it should be engaged in broader political struggles for social change (see Murray and Reshef 1988). Some analysts were critical of the manner in which SACTU’s alliance with the liberation movement subordinated the trade union struggles to the fight for national liberation (Feit 1975; Fine and Davis 1991) and during the 1970s an alternative political current emerged in the union movement, often labelled the ‘shop floor’ or ‘workerist’ tradition (Webster 2001a: 256–257). Advocates of this tradition – and in particular the unions affiliated with the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) – believed that it was important to avoid the path taken by SACTU in the 1960s and argued that it was essential to eschew nationalist politics and instead concentrate on the formation of strong shop floor organisation and factory-level demands. This focus met with a great deal of initial success as the unions gained official recognition from employers, which would have been impossible to attain if the unions had been formally aligned to the liberation movement (see Adler et al. 1992).

The strategic debate concerning the political orientation of the trade unions re-emerged in the face of growing unrest and resistance against the apartheid state during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Some union leaders were extremely wary of aligning with the national liberation movement because they feared it could threaten the hard-fought progress made by the unions and also because they were wary of the national liberation movement ‘hijacking’ the working class struggle and suppressing the struggle for socialism (Foster 1982). These concerns were most eloquently articulated by Martin Plaut, who warned against
forming alliances with the liberation movement because ‘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’ (Plaut 1987: 105). This caution was perhaps well justified, and many analysts have discussed the manner in which trade union movements across Africa were ultimately subordinated to nationalist movements in the post-independence period, with largely negative implications for the unions themselves (Cooper 1996; see also Beckman and Sachikonye 2010; Buhlungu 2010a; Freund 1988).

The re-emergence of the ‘populist’ or ‘national democratic tradition’ – advocating union involvement in the liberation struggle – clearly gathered momentum within the South African union movement in the early 1980s, leading to the formation of COSATU in 1985. Baskin and Friedman have argued that this shift was in part a response to grassroots pressures for the unions to take a political stance (Baskin 1991; Friedman 1987). COSATU’s leadership consistently reaffirmed the need for the unions to play a ‘leadership role’ within the struggle against both national and economic exploitation (COSATU 1987). Prominent union leaders, such as Jay Naidoo, the first general secretary of COSATU, argued that issues relating to workers’ oppression on the shop floor could not be distinguished from oppression of the apartheid government and therefore the ‘workers’ struggle’ and the fight to overthrow apartheid were fundamentally inseparable (see Adler et al. 1992: 328). COSATU began to play a leading role at the forefront of various township struggles and within umbrella organisations such as the United Democratic Front (UDF) (Adler et al. 1992: 309; Baskin 1991; Seekings 2000a; Siedman 1994; Webster 1988, 2001a).

COSATU entered into formal discussions with the exiled ANC in Lusaka in February 1986. After these meetings, a joint communiqué was released in which the federation committed itself to the liberation struggle, under the leadership of the ANC, while the ANC formally acknowledged the independence of COSATU. It stated:

[...]

[Lasting solutions can only emerge from the national liberation movement, headed by the ANC, and the entire democratic forces of our country, of which COSATU is an important and integral part. ... COSATU is seized with the task of engaging the workers in the general democratic struggle, both as an independent organisation and as an essential component of the democratic forces of our country. (quoted in Von Holde 1987: 101)]
Conclusion: Fractured Labour Struggles and the Unfinished Project of Liberation

The events of the last few tumultuous years in South Africa have undoubtedly drawn international focus to the country. The death of the ‘father of the nation’, Nelson Mandela, coupled with the brutal massacre of striking mineworkers in Marikana, provoked a period of reflection on just how far South Africa has progressed in the two decades since apartheid. In one moment, the images of police standing over the bodies of dead workers in Marikana reminded South Africans of a not too distant past, but they also laid bare the realities of South Africa’s violent present. It might sound strange or even alarmist to describe South Africa as a country beset by endemic violence, but not if we consider violence in a broader sense. Structural violence – in the form of massive inequalities of opportunities and resources that prevent people from achieving their full potential – continues to represent the defining feature of post-apartheid society. As Johann Galtung (1969) would have it, we can only consider a nation to have attained a meaningful peace when there is an absence of such structural violence. South Africa’s elusive social peace therefore reflects its unfinished project of liberation, one that has not yet sufficiently emancipated people from massive structural inequalities of class, race and gender.

As Thomas Piketty (2014) has argued, what we can witness in South Africa’s labour struggles is the much wider, global trend of increasing social unrest characterised by ‘distributional conflicts’ over the balance of the distribution of value between labour and capital. South Africa, as the ‘protest capital of the world’ (Alexander 2012), reflects perhaps one of the global epicentres of these distributional conflicts. This is partly, of course, because South Africa has one of the highest levels of income inequality on earth. It is also, however, a reflection of the vibrancy of South
African civil society and the continued significance of South Africa's powerful and globally revered trade union movement.

What role the trade unions will play in the future of these distributional conflicts is, however, far from clear. Scholars of the 'anti-globalisation' movement have long argued that organised labour should join with a broader 'movement of movements' resisting neoliberal globalisation (Clawson 2003; Moody 1997; Waterman 2001). Indeed, the South African unions in particular are argued to model the kind of 'social movement unionism' that northern unions ought to replicate in order to rejuvenate their organisation and political appeal. South Africa's unions previously exhibited some of the characteristics of this 'ideal type' of unionism, including vibrant shop floor democracy, rank-and-file militancy and 'horizontal' linkages to wider struggles (Webster 1988). However, as labour movements elsewhere are implored to 'look south' for their inspiration, one must question what they can hope to see in South Africa's contemporary labour movement. Are they looking superficially for a sanitised and romanticised view of South Africa's past and present that will serve to validate their prescriptions for northern unions?

If so, the 'NUMSA moment' may at first glance offer a glittering example of a nascent social movement unionism – given NUMSA's declared goals of re-energising its shop floor organisation and its desire to forge a 'United Front' with other sections of civil society embroiled in struggles against neoliberalism. NUMSA's decision to withdraw support for the ANC and begin working towards the formation of a new political party, the 'Movement for Socialism', potentially reflects the most important political development in the post-apartheid era. South Africa's 'predominant party system' (Southall 2005) – where electoral outcomes are not characterised by 'substantial uncertainty' (Habib 2005) – is now potentially under threat. For some analysts this should be welcome, especially those who have advocated for some time for the formation of a 'workers' party' that can challenge the ANC in elections (Bond 2001; Habib 2005; Habib and Taylor 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Harvey 2002; Legassick 2007). Indeed, it might also herald the beginning of what some authors predicted to be the inevitable break-up of the Alliance owing to the ineluctable contradictions of the implicit ideological compromise that formed the bedrock of this relationship described in chapter 1 (Buhlungu 2005).

The current fault lines are characterised by multiple divisions. This includes differing responses to the ANC's National Development Plan with one faction declaring it an irredeemable neoliberal initiative, while others more sympathetic to the current government and leadership of the ANC were more muted in their criticism and offered constructive
engagement with the plan. These divisions thus also reflect competing strategies of union engagement with the ANC government. This was highlighted by the response of the unions to the militant strike wave on the platinum belt in particular – a strike wave which brought these competing attitudes towards corporatism and relationships with the state into sharp focus. Sections of the ‘continuity’ faction – particularly NUM – decried the strikes as an ‘anarchic’ and dangerous development displaying ‘alien’ tendencies and influences, and driven by some ill-defined external agents bent on launching a political assault on the ANC’s power and/or destabilising the South African economy. Within the change faction – particularly NUMSA – these strikes were greeted more warmly as a display of the strength and the determination of workers to resist inequality and deprivation, even if this put workers on a collision course with their established unions or even the ANC government itself. The ideological divisions were perhaps brought home more obviously in relation to the Marikana massacre and the responses of the leading unions in each of the rival factions. While NUM painted a picture of ‘dark forces’ provoking an unnecessary and avoidable confrontation with the police, NUMSA (2014a), by contrast, framed the massacre ‘most decisive of all’ the factors that had led it to the conclusion that the Alliance was beyond saving, and that workers needed their own political party if they were to defend their interests in the face of what it framed as a violent and predatory state elite.

However, if one looks in more detail, organised labour in South Africa also offers scholars an insight into some of the challenges that trade unions are encountering in the era of globalisation and the vital need to understand these struggles in relation to the specificities of the national context. For some authors, recent developments represent yet another example of an ‘exhausted nationalism’ of an ANC elite that had begun to degenerate (Bond 2014). But speculation of nationalist ‘exhaustion’ is perhaps premature, because such narratives ignore both the manner in which nationalist movements can try to regenerate their appeal and the harmful impacts that the residual power of nationalist discourses can have on an alternative class-centred politics. What we can see is a ‘sticky’ nationalist politics that has greater staying power than might be assumed. As was argued in the previous chapter, nationalist regeneration can broadly be understood as taking two, not mutually exclusive, forms.

The first I call expansionary nationalism, involving the promotion of an inclusive non-racialism and premised upon extending the lifespan and potency of nationalist appeals for support through state largesse aimed at the transformation of the socioeconomic livelihoods
of the recently enfranchised black majority. A critical challenge facing NUMSA and its allies will be overcoming workers' 'enduring bonds of solidarity' (Buhlungu and Psoulis 1999) with the ANC. This book highlights the importance of understanding the mantle of liberation – the unique form of symbolic political capital which a liberation movement is endowed with upon assuming power. Such is the importance of this symbolism that the discursive contestation over who can legitimately lay claim to the liberation mantle forms a major element of how a liberation party relates to opposition groups and vice versa, as each seeks to assert their credentials as the 'true' standard bearers of the revolution (Dorman 2006; Ranger 2004). The book develops an understanding of what exactly national liberation means to workers, in terms of what expectations they have of their nationalist government and, crucially, how they would react if they felt these expectations were not being met. Nationalist movements in Africa have commonly seen themselves as the natural patron of the working class which, like other groups in society, must vie for influence within the nationalist movement and take its place alongside the movement in the name of development (Cooper 1996: 468–469; Freund 1988: 95). At present, what evidence is available on workers' attitudes is that they broadly accept this arrangement – instituted through the Tripartite Alliance – and are quite reticent about the idea of an independent political formation representing them (Buhlungu and Ellis 2012; Maree 2012).

Furthermore, this study has shown that workers' party loyalties are not necessarily driven by class alone and they expect the ANC to exhibit moral leadership on a broad range of issues. This illustrates the complexity of their identification with the party which is rooted in their understandings of the democratic transition as being about far more than simply economic transformation. It might be reductionist, therefore, to assume that a class-based politics will automatically supersede the 'narrow confines' of nationalist politics. To these workers, national liberation has never been simply about the fulfilment of class aspirations, and a workers' party would face great difficulty in appealing to them based on a purely class-based platform with greater success than the ANC's 'broad church' politics. It is clear from these workers' attitudes towards the succession battle that they do not, in any event, believe the ANC to be an exhausted nationalist party which is fundamentally irredeemable because of its inability to meet the broad-ranging expectations they have of it. While deeply critical of the ANC government, they, nonetheless, identify positive elements of transformation under the ANC, rather than simply dismissing the party's elites as 'sell outs'. There is, in short, still
potency to the expansionary nationalist project discussed above, and the ANC continues to reinvest in the unique symbolic political capital it enjoys as the liberation movement by making incremental improvements to workers' lives. The greatest challenge to this in the medium to longer term, of course, is the capacity for the ANC to avoid the pitfalls of patronage politics that have — by its own admission (ANC 2012a) — become a mainstay of party activity (Beresford 2015; Lodge 2014).

The second is a more exclusionary nationalism, involving a defensive strategy of nationalist regeneration that employs the 'exclusionary languages of liberation' (Dorman 2006; Raftopolous 2004) that draw upon populist rhetoric to deride opposition to the nationalist movement as illegitimate expressions of an 'alien' political agenda, and using the control over the state and its resources to establish an exclusionary patronage-based form of socioeconomic redistribution that rewards political loyalty. Each of these strategies, in their own way, attempts to regenerate nationalist appeals and we can see in the nationalist–populist response to the change faction and NUMSA in particular an attempt to cast this new political initiative as the work of sinister third parties engaged in efforts to overthrow the ANC and thus deprive the South African public of their sovereign government and 'heroic' liberation movement. While such discourses will, of course, be derided and dismissed by many, we should not ignore the political potency of such fantastical assertions. These discourses attempt to make class-based political fault lines indecipherable by problematising which groups have the legitimacy to speak on behalf of 'the workers' and with what authority. They attempt to make nationalist struggles and class struggles synonymous and indissoluble, thus rendering it difficult for a 'post-nationalist' era driven by easily recognisable class antagonisms to emerge as a distinctive historical juncture.

This is further compounded by the interpenetration of factionalism within the ruling party and the trade unions. As Freund notes, while unions could potentially offer an alternative to the predominance of patronimonal politics and the corruption that exudes from it, they have rarely been able to do so (Freund 1988; Sandbrook 1975). While NUMSA's bold political decision has been lauded by some academic commentators, there is perhaps a need to temper some of the high expectations held in some quarters for what NUMSA and its 'Movement for Socialism' will be able to achieve. The deep divisions that have emerged within the union movement have been met with dismay from all sides of the factional divides and the nature of these bitter factional struggles has exacerbated the fragmentation of the labour movement, leading it to what some of
its leaders are framing as an existential threat. For those labour scholars looking to learn lessons from ‘looking south’ right now, it is therefore essential to understand exactly how and why these struggles emerged _when_ they did and in the _manner_ they did. The NUMSA moment cannot be understood simply as an ideological divide ‘inevitably’ waiting to erupt into a political fissure in the Alliance. The timing and character of this recent development cannot be explained by some immutable iron law of class politics alone, and instead has to be seen as a product of the fallout of post-colonial class formation and the intense patronage-fuelled factional struggles that have emerged out of battles to control access to resources and opportunities imbued within the post-colonial state and the political formations that vie for its control. Factional contestation within the ANC has spilled over into the unions, sucking in the protagonists in union-based contests into a wider political struggle for access to the ‘spoils’ of positions within the unions, the Alliance and the state. The character of ANC factionalism has thus increasingly come to characterise internal union struggles, leading to brutal purges and an array of debilitating forms of infighting. While there are ideological differences between the rival factions, what has emerged out of the intensity of these factional struggles is not some unsullied new left wing political formation, but a divided and fragmented labour movement that has been severely weakened and remains at war with itself rather than what might be thought of as its traditional class enemies. Asking which way ‘the’ movement will go next is perhaps the wrong question to ask: those looking to learn from South Africa’s unions and to understand what role labour movements can play in the global ‘distributional conflicts’ described by Piketty will now be forced to trace the fortunes of various competing fragments of what had previously been a much more united struggle.

The inability of the unions to maintain autonomy from the patronage-fuelled factionalism of the ruling party thus reflects another element of the ‘sticky’ nature of post-liberation nationalist politics. This is in part due to their inability to forge a coherent working class consciousness and a coherent political platform independent of the patrimonial struggles for position and influence in the ANC (Freund 1988: 109; Sandbrook 1975: 123). Buhlangu and Ellis (2012: 274–276) note that South Africa’s unions have been unable to articulate a coherent approach to socialist politics at a national level. The evidence from this ethnographic case study highlights how class formation is generating the diversification and stratification of COSATU’s membership base at the shop floor. This, coupled with the union’s inability to maintain a
solid base of activism within the NUM (a problem shared by other affiliates), serves to corrode the unifying class identity of the unions – further compounding the potential difficulties in forging a clear political agenda and the ‘solid class outlook’ that labour scholars deem essential for rejuvenating their political agenda (Moody 1997: 201–227). It is therefore vital to unpack the complexities of what Von Holdt (2003) calls the profound ‘transition from below’ in the South African workplace, including the complexities of the manner in which the organised working class experience deracialised capitalism and also how they seek to formulate responses to it.

The trade unions, much like other sections of the liberation movement, have witnessed a ‘race to riches’ in which leadership positions have become stepping stones into political careers or lucrative private-sector opportunities. This has increased the social distance between union officials and the rank and file. Positions of high office are seen as lucrative ‘prizes’ and this dynamic is part and parcel of processes of post-colonial class formation. However, these processes extend beyond the emergence of the so-called ‘black diamonds’ class of black business leaders, and the growth of a professional black middle class. At the workplace level, this has taken the form of shop stewards being promoted into supervisory or management positions (see also Von Holdt 2003; Webster 2001b: 197). This phenomenon can be witnessed in NUM, where a small number of NUM shop stewards have utilised their positions as vehicles of social mobility. Although this phenomenon is complex and difficult to accurately quantify, it is, nonetheless, having a deleterious effect on NUM’s organisation. While on the one hand this is seen by both workers and NUM leaders to bring benefits in the form of a more sympathetic management, at the same time it is also perceived by a large number of workers to threaten the very integrity of the union’s structures by eroding workers’ trust in their shop stewards while simultaneously eroding the collective identity of the union as a bastion of working class solidarity.

The study of NUM identifies an emerging class divide at the workplace that further impairs its ability to mobilise its members. First, the union has struggled to organise sections of the workforce who are finding their jobs outsourced to private contractors and who are facing increasingly precarious, low-paid and unprotected forms of employment. This represents a serious challenge to the unions in South Africa – like those elsewhere in the world – of organising beyond its traditional constituency and reaching out to the broader ‘precariat’ (Standing 2011) who do not enjoy ‘traditional’ employment relations. If it cannot do this, South Africa’s labour movement will continue to face a ‘crisis of representivity’,
which undermines its capacity to politically mobilise a broader section of the working class and compounds the problems global labour faces in its ‘search for relevance’ in the twenty-first century (Turner et al. 2001).

There is also an emerging divide within the NUM’s membership itself, however. The manner in which more upwardly mobile workers are grasping at the new opportunities available to them is eroding collective solidarities and participation in NUM’s structures. The upwardly mobile workers are less reliant on collective solidarities to advance their individual livelihoods and they therefore engage in a far more passive and instrumental fashion with the union, relying on it to protect them in the face of individual crises but not proactively engaging within NUM in order to strengthen its organisation and to fight collective struggles. This demobilisation has been further compounded by legal restrictions preventing strike action in the industry. These restrictions have opened up a divide between ordinary union members and their national leaders, a divide which is fuelled by mistrust, rumours and conspiracy theories, which have once again eroded trust in NUM’s structures while further undermining the militant identity of NUM as a ‘union of strikes’. The result has been the widespread demoralisation of the rank and file and their resulting disengagement from union affairs which, once again, are trends highlighted by scholars examining other industries. Taken together, this myriad of factors contributing to union demobilisation highlights the inadequacy of one-size-fits-all theories of oligarchic bureaucratic leadership stymieing rank-and-file militancy. They point to the importance of understanding labour politics at the grassroots level and the need to continue a proud tradition of industrial sociology in South African labour studies. NUM is by no means representative of the entire labour movement in South Africa, but what this case study does highlight is some of the acute contradictions that post-apartheid capitalism has generated for the unions and the kinds of difficulties they face in forging a coherent and credible political alternative amid South Africa’s current crisis.

How the ANC will attempt to regenerate its nationalist appeal in the long term in the face of increasing criticism over the abuse of state power by party elites and the unrelenting structural violence that South Africans continue to face in their everyday lives remains to be seen. It is likely that it will continue to blend together both expansionary and exclusionary methods of regenerating its appeal while it has the capacity to do so. The latter is clearly gaining in significance in the wake of the ANC’s extremely defensive reaction to the emergence of the new political threat emerging from the trade unions. However, those that
seek to write off the ANC should be mindful of this capacity to regenerate its nationalist appeal, and also the manner in which this can present challenges to a new left wing politics emerging by muddying the ideological waters. The obstacles before NUMSA and its allies as they embark on this new political strategy are considerable, not least because, as this book has argued, the union movement itself is deeply divided.

The attention of scholars around the world is focused on how the 'distributional conflicts' might be fought out and what role the organised working class might play within such struggles. Labour scholars can continue to learn a great deal from the South African struggles, so long as the study of them involves due diligence and a commitment to understanding how these struggles play out at both macro and micro levels of analysis. Nelson Mandela's death, the Marikana massacre and now the 'NUMSA moment' have generated fresh discussions about the future of politics. They have opened up conversations about multiple possible futures and focused global attention on where it needs to be: the enduring nature of structural violence that renders South Africa's project of liberation, like so many others, an unfinished one. They have also, however, lifted the lid on a volatile, unpredictable and violent political present. Scholars might not want to peer beneath, and may not like what they see, but if we are to develop an empirically grounded understanding of the social forces that can help South Africa move beyond its current impasse, we have a responsibility to confront the complexities and realities of the present.
Notes

4 Class Formation and the Politics of Social Mobility

1 The manner in which Eskom has increasingly 'outsourced' the 'non-core' functions performed by workers in the power stations to independent 'contractors' has meant that officials perceived that Eskom no longer hires manual workers, or 'labourers'. As a result of this, any young 'labourers' working in this workforce and telling the older male workers what to do because it was considered 'disrespectful'.

2 They are allowed to remain shop stewards even if this happens.

3 NUM has a purpose-built facility in Johannesburg – the Elijah Barayi Memorial Training Centre – which offers education and training to shop stewards and leaders ranging from 'political education' through to the basics of employment law, negotiation tactics and the basics of employee representation and case work.

4 Indeed, those shop stewards that I was in contact with who were promoted did not stand for re-election. NUM Regional Chairperson, Piet Matosa, for example, was continuously elected into positions within the mining company which he described as being 'practically management'.

5 A research organisation which conducts research on behalf of the South African labour movement and has close ties with COSATU.

6 Workers referred to as 'artisans' within Eskom were generally skilled manual workers, for example, electricians, technicians or mechanics.

5 Union Democracy, Social Mobility and Stifled Militancy

1 This supports the SWOP survey finding about workers' expectations of their shop stewards which found that only 1 per cent of workers did not expect their shop stewards to report back to them (Wood and Dibben 2006: 57).

2 Although it was very rare that what workers could point to as having happened in their memory.

3 When I originally informed the Regional Chair that I would be going to Durban and Arnott he told me that he would have preferred it had I been going that the two sites would make where the union was 'strong' in both cases, but that the two sites would make a useful comparison because of this.
4 In fact, not only is Duvha closer to the regional offices, the full-time shop steward worked at Duvha before taking on his role and still had friends and connections at the power station.
5 Because, for example, one of them was a manager and had a company car.
6 The ‘1976 youth’ refers to what is recounted by union members—and in South African literature more broadly—as the younger generation of activists that emerged on the political scene following the Soweto uprising of 1976.
7 This was expressed by not only rank-and-file workers in the power stations but also some shop stewards in workshops. However, in the case of the latter it was unclear whether this reflected their actual beliefs or simply factional battles within the union itself.
8 When these statements were made workers would often cast around stating that ‘perhaps’ their leaders were ‘on Eskom salaries’.
9 It should be noted that this bewilderment was expressed at both power stations and even branch officials themselves expressed being perplexed about what was happening at the national level.
10 For obvious reasons Eskom workers often used this image to describe the prospect of strike action that would cause power cuts.
11 Although this was later dropped.
12 This was the language most commonly used to describe the strike option.
13 Sometimes it was referred to as having a limb amputated and thus being rendered immobile.
14 Although there was a degree of disagreement as to whether this was a terminal decline or one that could be redressed through a radical organisational overhaul.
15 Although the ‘essential services’ apply to many of the public sector workplaces.

6 Exhausted or Regenerative Nationalism?

1 A traditional heavy leather whip.
2 This attitude was expressed at union gatherings to me by full-time shop stewards and regional union leaders.
3 This refers to an outbreak of cholera in Delmas in 2000.
4 For example, older relatives would be required to assist with child care if workers had young families. This, they said, allowed them to work longer hours if necessary and was also essential for workers who worked peculiar shift patterns, which was quite common.
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