

Class struggle, the Left and power

After the election dust settles

Jonathan Payn

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Part 1

Twenty-five years into democracy the black working class majority in South Africa has not experienced any meaningful improvements in its conditions. The apartheid legacy of unequal education, healthcare and housing and the super-exploitation of black workers continues under the ANC and is perpetuated by the neoliberal policies it has imposed.

These troubles are part of the world's troubles; this neoliberalism is part of global neoliberalism. As the global economic crisis deepens, the global ruling class is making the working class pay, transferring the costs to workers and the poor, leading to increased poverty, unemployment, inequality and insecurity. And so in South Africa neoliberal oppression is piled on top of national oppression.

The only force capable of changing this situation is the working class locally and internationally. Yet to do so, struggles need to come together, new forms of organisation appropriate to the context are needed; and they need both to be infused with a revolutionary progressive politics and to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Some such struggles have occurred over recent years, including the historic platinum mineworkers' strike and farmworkers' strike in 2012; but the many struggles have not yet pulled together into a new movement.

Outside the ANC alliance, there have indeed been many efforts to unite struggles – but these have largely failed to resonate with the working class in struggle and form the basis of a new movement.

Nowhere is this more evident than with the newly-formed Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) – which got less than 25 000 votes in the national elections, despite the fact that the union that conceived it, Numsa, claims nearly 400 000 members.

NUMSA'S NON-MOMENT

When the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa) announced its resolutions, following its historic 2013 Special National Congress, to break with the ANC and SACP and to form a "United Front against neoliberalism", many on the left were hopeful that this would give working class movements the new ideological and organisational direction they need.

The United Front, Numsa said, was not about building a new organisation, party or labour federation but "a way to join other organisations in action, in the trenches", gaining community support for Numsa campaigns and building "concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place".

It looked as if these hopes were not misplaced when, for example, unemployed youth and community activists across the country responded positively to Numsa's call by supporting the 19 March 2014 actions against the Youth Wage Subsidy. Branches were set up and, despite initial scepticism, community activists joined.

By August 2017, however, the Johannesburg branch of the United Front had declared that, "After the initial enthusiasm, there is now a feeling the UF has largely collapsed, with only a couple of local structures still active." Numsa had shifted its focus and resources to establishing a "Movement for Socialism" because "the working-class needs a political organisation committed in its policies and actions to the establishment of a socialist South Africa".

Having gained some community support for its campaigns, including the United Front itself, the success of the United Front in building working class unity going forward depended on whether Numsa would reciprocate by putting its resources and capacity at the service of building “concrete support for other struggles of the working class and the poor wherever and whenever they take place”.

Instead, Numsa energies were shifted into calling for a new workers’ party, while presenting itself as the vanguard of the whole working class, and in so doing missed its moment.

THE SRWP WON’T SET YOU FREE

Numsa undertook to “conduct a thoroughgoing discussion on previous attempts to build socialism as well as current experiments to build socialism” and “commission an international study on the historical formation of working-class parties, including exploring different type of parties – from mass workers’ parties to vanguard parties”. But it already knew what it was aiming for. It had said that a new political party was on the cards – to replace the SACP, which had become corrupted by the neoliberal state, as the political vanguard of the working class.

The potential of the United Front approach for building working class unity is precisely because it accommodates ideological differences in order to build the unity of working class formations in struggle. But Numsa still looks to the legacy of Communist Parties. And these parties have historically used united fronts to create unity in action in struggles against capitalist attacks, but also with the aim of winning over the majority in these struggles to their programme – in this case the formation of a new party, that they would lead – under their Party leadership and no one else’s.

While Numsa has broken with Cosatu and the SACP organisationally, it has not broken with them ideologically. The belief by a section of full-time Numsa leaders that they are the vanguard of the working class and their insistence on building a party to contest state power are founded on the same ideological certainties and theoretical understandings of class, power and the nature of the state as the SACP – with the same strategic implications that, invariably, will have the same disappointing outcomes.

If we really want to build a movement for socialism, and to avoid merely replacing one set of rulers for another, the state-centric left needs to rethink its understandings class, power and the nature of the state in light of the imperial evidence and learn from the mistakes of the past, instead of repeating them and expecting a different outcome.

Part 2

The first part of this series stated that, despite various well-intentioned efforts by forces on the extra-Alliance and independent left over recent years to unite working class struggles in South Africa, these largely have and will continue to fail to resonate with the working class, help build unity in struggle and form the basis of a new movement because of the theoretical understandings of class and power – and their strategic implications – on which they are founded and which are prevalent on much of the left.

This article will give a basic overview of these theoretical understandings of class and power and their strategic implications and limitations and why it is therefore necessary to refine and develop understandings of class and power more capable of responding to the context of the

neoliberal restructuring of the working class in order to advance the class struggle in pursuit of socialism.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF NUMSA'S NON-MOMENT

The strategic approach that Numsa's bureaucracy and permanent leaders have taken since its 2013 Special National Congress, from calling for the launch of a "United Front against to neoliberalism", exploring "the establishment of a Movement for Socialism" to the launch of the Socialist Revolutionary Workers Party (SRWP) is, like Cosatu and the SACP, informed by its class analysis. In fact, it is informed by the same class analysis.

According to this analysis capitalism is a class society in which the ruling class minority (bourgeoisie) exploits the working class majority (proletariat) in order to extract a profit (surplus value) to become even more rich and powerful. It is able to do this because it holds private ownership of the means of production (factories, land, mines etc.), which is legally recognised and protected by the state. Because the working class owns nothing – due to "primitive accumulation" (e.g. colonialism, dispossession of land and the means of production from the direct producers) – workers are force to sell their labour in exchange for a wage in order to buy the goods they need to survive (commodities) on the market. Class is defined primarily in terms of one's relations to the means of production: the ruling class owns the means of production but doesn't do productive work, the working class sells its labour for a wage at the point of production but doesn't own it.

This, inevitably, gives rise to the class struggle for greater economic gains and an extension of rights and freedoms, in which the (permanently employed) industrial proletariat is identified as the only revolutionary subject because of its location at the point of production (factories, mines) and, therefore, its ability to withdraw its labour by going on strike. Because they are not considered to have the potential to be revolutionary other sectors of the working class, such as the peasantry (small farmers and rural workers) and "lumpen proletariat" (the unemployed, people working in the informal economy etc.), are typically ignored. Something which might help explain why, despite all their lip service to the contrary, all the major unions – whether Cosatu, Saftu or others – have by and large not only failed but never seriously tried to organise precarious labour broker, casual and short-term contract workers.

However, according to this theory the working class, including the revolutionary subject (industrial workers), is struggling so much just to survive that they cannot develop a revolutionary consciousness and their demands and struggles are only centred around so-called bread and butter issues. Because the working class is only capable of reaching this, what Lenin called "trade union consciousness" it needs to be led by a political vanguard of so-called revolutionaries organised in the form of a political party that seeks state power in order to implement socialism through the state.

Sectors of the working class outside of the permanently employed industrial proletariat are not only ignored or dismissed for not being revolutionary but even looked down on with disdain by this self-declared revolutionary vanguard – which might explain both the Numsa leadership's reference to community struggles as "leaderless and disorganised" and the heckling by Numsa delegates to the Working Class Summit when, for example, unemployed community activists and farmworkers expressed different opinions.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS & LIMITATIONS THEREOF

As stated, the ruling class minority is able to get away with this situation of exploitation and injustice with the help of the state. The state, according to this analysis, is a neutral institution that can function in the interests of the working class or ruling class depending on what forces are in control of state power. Because the state is understood to be neutral state power is therefore something that, if under the control of a socialist or workers' party, can be used in the interests of the working class and in pursuit of socialism.

The implication of this analysis, besides overlooking the creative revolutionary potential of the vast majority of the working class, is that the building of a political party to contest state power is both necessary and inevitable. This can either be done by contesting elections (reformist socialism) or an armed uprising (revolutionary socialism).

Because, again according to this analysis, the broader working class is supposedly incapable of being revolutionary and therefore requires an enlightened revolutionary vanguard to take control of the state and implement socialism from above; and because power is seen to lie primarily in the state and as something to be "seized" or "taken" so-called mass movements, such as unions, social movements and the United Front, are but a means to an end. That end is to build support for the party and help get it into state power – either by voting or through revolution.

However, because the state by its nature is an authoritarian and hierarchical institution that centralises decision-making and other power, which flows from the top down, so too does every political party whose aim it is to gain state power replicate this structure. Moreover, because the leaderships thereof – including socialist and workers' parties – inherit the privileges and power of the predecessors they dispose of, instead of destroying exploitative class relations they tend to and have, historically, simply reproduced them in the name of the workers and poor.

The next installation in this education series will look at a more nuanced theoretical understanding of class and power and the strategic implications thereof for building working class unity in struggle that offer an alternative to the tried, tested and consistently disappointing state-centric one on which the SRWP and much of the left is based.

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