

A spectre is haunting us

It's the past weighing like a nightmare on the present

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Contents

Unresolved capitalist crisis	3
An unraveling of traditional parties of the ruling classes	4
The rise of toxic nationalisms as a 'solution'	5
The resurgence of imperialist rivalries	6
The restructured working class	7
It is more of the same	8

The context we now exist in is one that is defined by glaring contradictions everywhere, its fractured, changing, unstable and confrontational. It is a time of despair, but also pockets of hope.

On the one hand, a spectre is haunting us, but it is not the one that Marx spoke of. Rather an authoritarian and extreme right wing form of capitalism, last seen on extensive scale in the 1930s, is rearing its hideous ghost-like head.

This right wing extremism has become an ‘acceptable’ form of politics amongst some people in the context of the unresolved capitalist crisis. It is the ‘solution’ amongst sections of ruling classes in many countries to a crisis that is not going away. As part of this, many states are passing laws attacking basic rights that oppressed classes have won through decades and even centuries of struggle (including in South Africa); states are beginning to bare their teeth more often rather than being in a position to rule by consent; toxic nationalisms based on exclusionary racial, ethnic and religious identities (including within sections of the population in South Africa) have once again become acceptable and even embraced by sections of the population (giving rise to the likes of Trump, Le Pen and Duterte and xenophobia and other ills in South Africa); and bigotry and hate are back.

Yet there is also hope. In many parts of the world, sections of the working class have fought back. This has seen movements of protests in some parts, attempts to revive unions in others and in some cases the re-emergence of left political parties and projects. But it is also a restructured working class, a working class that is fundamentally different from even the 1970s. New or different forms of organising happen next to the old. It is thus also a working class in which the past weighs like a nightmare on the present in organisational terms; experimenting with the new and different ways of organising, but also falling back into the old.

Unresolved capitalist crisis

It is clear that the capitalist crisis is not over. It has its origins in the problems of over-production and over-accumulation that arose initially in the 1930s. The problem was exacerbated in the 1970s with the implementation of neoliberal policies and the rise of financialisation, as ruling classes across the globe, including in South Africa, attempted to restore profit rates—something which has not happened.

But the rise of financialisation has made the system extremely unstable. By some accounts there have been over 70 different ‘financial’ crises in various parts of the world since 1970, with the biggest being in 2008/09.

The reality is that the legacy of 2008/09 is still firmly with us. Despite bailing out corporations and undertaking Quantitative Easing (QE), the underlying problems of over-accumulation and over-production have not been solved. Hence, all the money corporations have received from states has been used to continue to speculate—as this is the only ‘profitable’ outlet for their vast surpluses.

Growth has, therefore, been anemic in most parts of the world over the last ten years. Some countries, such as Greece and Venezuela, have experienced conditions akin to the Great Depression. In South Africa growth has often hovered below 1%, and in the last quarter the economy contracted by 2%.

In the last few months, countries such as South Africa, have in fact become extremely vulnerable. The money provided to financial institutions via QE and bailouts was used to speculate on bonds in so-called emerging or developing markets. With interest rates rising in the U.S.—under the guise of controlling inflation, but in reality to keep wages low—and with the tapering and ending of QE, speculators have been returning their money to the U.S. and dumping bonds of so-called emerging markets. This has led to the Rand dropping in the last two months and a full-blown crisis in countries such as Argentina.

We are in a context, therefore, where the bubbles that have been created, and that have led to minimal growth at best, will burst—it is not a matter of if, but when. When they do, it is states such as South Africa that could be worst hit. This is not a reason for celebration: the social, political and economic consequences for the working class could be catastrophic. Misery does not lead like a straight line to revolution or even resistance.

An unraveling of traditional parties of the ruling classes

The fact that the capitalist crisis has been unresolved has led sections of the ruling classes in countries such as the US, Britain, Italy, Philippines, Hungary and France to begin to look for political alternatives to the status quo. That traditional parties of the ruling classes, including social democratic and national liberation parties, have imposed neoliberalism and austerity means they have also lost credibility in the eyes of working class voters, meaning they cannot keep neoliberalism and austerity going by consent.

Sections of the ruling classes in a number of countries have come to realise this and have begun to build and promote alternatives to these parties and politicians. Most, but not all, have been extremely right wing parties and politicians, which these sections of the ruling classes are hoping can restore profits through authoritarianism. This has led to the rise of Duterte, Trump, the Front Nationale, Lega, Jobbik and the Five Star Movement—politicians and parties that were solidly on the fringe as recently as a decade ago. They portrayed themselves as outside the so-called ‘establishment,’ and as defenders of the interests of the ordinary people. In reality they push a strongly pro-ruling class agenda, including massive tax cuts for corporations and the rich. Some of these parties and politicians, such as Lega and Jobbik, are neo-fascist; others, like the Five Star Movement and Trump, have been described as right-wing ‘populists’.

In South Africa too we have seen that in the context of the unresolved capitalist crisis, the unraveling of the party of the ruling class since 1994, the ANC, has also occurred to a degree. This has seen other parties, such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) and to a lesser degree the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), increasing the percentage of the vote. The reality is that under this, the ANC could turn to some populist measures, whilst maintaining the core of neoliberalism, to maintain its share of the vote. But should its decline continue, and should Ramaphosa fail to revive the ANC, sections of the ruling class too in South Africa will begin looking for an alternative that can shore up the system. Already aspirant sections of the black middle class and black capitalists are looking to the EFF as an alternative to the ANC, with the EFF being sold as a party that will further the interests of the black working class, when in reality if it is in power its agenda may be very different.

The rise of toxic nationalisms as a ‘solution’

To shore up the agendas of these parties and politicians—and to try and win over sections of the working class—there has been an appeal to nationalisms based on exclusionary notions of race, religion and ethnicity in many parts of the world. In the U.S., France, Italy, and Britain there a rise in a form of white supremacist Christian nationalism and even neo-fascism. Immigrants from Africa, the Middle East and Latin America have been scapegoated as being the cause of the pressure and attack working and middle class people face as a result of the capitalist crisis and the actions of states—in the form of austerity to protect the interests and wealth of the ruling classes.

This to some degree has worked, as sections of the working and middle classes have bought into these narratives. This has become possible partly because under neoliberalism, class as a notion and form of politics has been under relentless attack from the ruling class, the media and sections of academia. Linked to this, politics based on identity have been promoted within public discourse—with the unintentional consequences in reality being an opening of space for nationalism based on essentialised notions of race and ethnicity—defined by the ideology that everyone belonging to certain race or ethnic groups share the same innate characteristics. Few would have believed such overt racist politics could and would become popular again, but sadly it is a spectre that has arisen from the grave.

Along with this, postmodernism has also inadvertently opened space for demagogy. Blatant lying, character assassination and scapegoating are the order of the day in such ‘populist’ politics, with facts at best being relative or not important at all. This too has filtered into some of the politics in South Africa from the national level right down to even sections of grassroots politics. Indeed, battles around positions in local councils for example involve this type of politics and more frighteningly actual assassinations.

This poses a major challenge for progressive politics, including in South Africa. The reason is, it avoids dealing with the root causes of the problems faced within society, namely class rule and capitalism. In fact, various nationalisms based on race and ethnicity have once again risen to prominence in South Africa. A white form of nationalism remains popular amongst large sections of white capitalist, middle, and working classes—and it was the basis around which apartheid was built. Using identity based on race and religion, a false cross-class alliance was built supposedly based on whiteness, and the legacy of this remains in place. Today remnants of this politics influence sections of the DA and groups such as Afriforum. This is stirring increased racial tensions in South Africa with potentially explosive consequences.

The reality is that the class consciousness that underpinned sections of the anti-apartheid struggle has been severely eroded in South Africa over the last 20 years, partly due to the ideology of neoliberalism. In the mainstream media, academia and amongst sections of the NGO sector, class has become something that is dismissed, denied and downplayed; while identity politics has been elevated.

In this context, where class politics is extremely weak, sections of the black working class too (but by no means a majority) are turning to nationalisms based on supposed ingrained race and ethnic identities in the face of exploitation and oppression. This too has led some to adopt a toxic form of politics, including xenophobia. Indeed, sections—but certainly not the whole of the working class—sometimes turn to blaming ‘foreigners’ from other parts of Africa for their oppression—instead of the ruling class and the capitalist system. This has led to instances of

violence towards people from other parts of Africa. This is not surprising as the ruling class in South Africa has been promoting xenophobia for decades now. It is not an accident that the vast majority of refugees seeking asylum in South Africa are turned down, and so-called illegal immigrants from the rest of Africa are effectively imprisoned in horrendous conditions by the state before being deported.

We also see a toxic form of nationalism beginning to be expressed by political parties such as the EFF whose leadership often subjects South African people of Indian decent to racial slurs and insult. Likewise, sections of the so-called 'coloured' working class have also begun to mobilise around a supposed shared ethnic identity against a so-called 'black African' section of the working class. In KwaZulu-Natal, the remnants of the IFP, the Zulu royal family, so-called traditional leaders and a faction around Zuma, have also been stirring up the spectre of Zulu nationalism. Apartheid created fertile ground for such forms of politics and in the recent period—marked by a profound social, political and economic crisis—this is gaining ground unfortunately even amongst a minority of the working class.

Internationally these toxic forms of nationalism, especially of the neo-fascist variety, are also appealing to false mythic histories and 'traditions,' which incorporate patriarchy and indeed embrace it, despite some of the extreme right-wing parties in Europe having women leaders, such as Marine Le Pen.

The resurgence of imperialist rivalries

With extreme right wing nationalist politicians and parties gaining power in key states—such as the U.S.—the push for yet more austerity has only strengthened. Under Trump, social protection and welfare for the working class has been gutted—it was already eroded under neoliberalism, but this has now deepened.

It has, however, not just been right-wing parties and politicians that have imposed austerity but all parties that have been head of, or have come to head, states in this period of crisis. For example, despite claiming left credentials, when in power and under pressure from finance capital and EU institutions, Syriza in Greece has been imposing harsh austerity. In South Africa too, the ANC has capped the state's national budget, it has reduced transfers to local government (where services are delivered) and has even proportionately reduced its spending on housing over the last few years. This despite undertaking its own populist actions like expanding free education to a degree, and under pressure from #FeesMustFall. Thus growing austerity on state spending on the working class is escalating, shifting the burden even more onto the shoulders of working class women in terms of the reproduction of the class.

As the capitalist crisis has continued, rivalries amongst imperialist states has also intensified at the behest of sections of the ruling classes of the most powerful states. This has seen the U.S. begin to implement a form of protection, in terms of trade tariffs, against up and coming rivals such as China and even its erstwhile allies in the EU. Politically this has enabled the U.S. state, for example, to please sections working and middle class people—who fear the loss of their jobs in terms of offshoring and competition from imports—whilst still implementing austerity.

The Chinese ruling class for its part has responded to the U.S. state's tariffs with their own. In fact, China is attempting to build a trade block with countries, such as South Africa, Brazil and even the EU, outside the influence of the US. The growing rivalry between the U.S. state and the

Chinese state is one of the key features internationally. In Europe, sections of the ruling class, such as in France and Germany, are attempting to ensure so-called Free Trade remains in place, but they too are reluctantly being drawn into the possibility of a trade war by the onslaught of the Trump regime.

As inter-imperialist rivalries have intensified or renewed in the context of a capitalist crisis, proxy wars—such as that in Syria—have become more vicious. These proxy wars have and will destroy the lives of millions of people—forcing them to immigrate not so much for a better life, but to survive. It is these refugees that are being scapegoated by the extreme right in Europe.

The restructured working class

It is now common knowledge amongst progressive forces that the working class internationally and in South Africa has been restructured under neoliberalism. Permanent nine to five jobs, with the same employer for years, are becoming ever scarcer. Under lean production, more and more jobs have been outsourced, shift work has become a feature of production and precarious work has arisen. In South Africa too, labour brokering has become very common.

Globally, structural unemployment has been on the rise, especially amongst youth. This is the case even amongst states in Europe, such as Spain, where youth unemployment stands at 35%. In South Africa, the problem of structural unemployment has been in place for almost two decades—with the expanded unemployment rate hovering between 35 and 40 percent over that period. There are in fact, some sections of the working class that have come to exist outside of the relations of production, not because they don't want to sell their labour, but rather because they will never be able to.

Under this onslaught, wages for those who are employed have tended to stagnate and lose value in real terms. To try and maintain a semblance of a decent lifestyle, sections of the working and lower middle classes have become extremely indebted. This has been a feature of financialisation and it has been a key weapon that the ruling classes internationally have used to extract wealth from the working class. It has also been ideologically seen as a way to explicitly discipline the working class—the notion being workers that are heavily indebted are less likely to strike.

The burden of the reproduction of the working class—as noted above—has also fallen more and more upon working class women. The days of states providing education, electricity, water and decent housing for the working class as social services have gone. They were won in struggle by the working class over decades; they have now been taken away by the ruling classes through their own political struggle against the oppressed and exploited. Today's services, including housing, have been commercialised or hollowed out at best—they are an avenue for actual and potential profits for corporations. Those without money don't get the services and it is generally women that have to step in to ensure families can survive.

This state of affairs has been rationalised through the promotion of the ideology of neoliberal restructuring. The state and sections of the media strongly reinforces individualist ideology, which has consequently taken hold in sections of the working class. Class consciousness has been eroded and even traditional social organisations of the working class, such as sports clubs and workers' clubs, have been undermined globally. The goal is to atomise the working class and to break it into sections so that organising becomes increasingly difficult, leaving workers disunited, fragmented and, therefore, more controllable.

With the unresolved capitalist crisis, the restructuring of the working class by the ruling classes and their states has continued apace. As part of this, growing automation and mechanisation—which is also a response to workers' militant struggles in countries such as China—has accelerated. This attack by the ruling classes has been camouflaged under the ideological notion of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution.

It is more of the same

A number of states in the last few years too have attacked the rights workers have won. In the U.S. the state has passed laws allowing greater over-time and in France the state attempted to severely curtail rights. In South Africa too we have seen the state attempting to amend the labour laws to undermine the right to strike and to curtail the length of strikes. Ruling classes, using their control over states, are rolling out such laws in an attempt to restore profits in manufacturing and mining and it is a feature of the current context.

Likewise, most states are also strengthening their law enforcement arms and many, including South Africa, have used the supposed threat of terrorism to do so. In the process, human rights, won through decades and centuries of struggle by the oppressed classes, are being rolled back at an ever alarming rate by many states in the context of the capitalist crisis. This is so whether states are governed by extreme right wing politicians and parties, traditional parties of the ruling class or so-called social democratic and even leftist parties (such as Syriza)—the only thing that does differ is the pace at which it is happening with the extreme right moving more swiftly under the cover of nationalism.

The reality is that sections of the working class have resisted both the attacks and the shift rightwards in many parts of the world. Prime examples of this have been the earlier struggles of the Arab Spring, the occupy movement, the uprisings in Greece, and strike waves in China. In South Africa we have also seen resistance at the point of production and within communities. This has included Marikana and the continuing wave of community protests against a lack of urban land, housing, water and electricity.

Many of the people involved in these protest movements have tried to find ways—unconsciously—to organise in a new or different way to the traditional vehicles of working class organisations, in terms of political parties and trade unions. As part of this, these initiatives have tended to use direct action as their most potent weapon. It must be stressed through that it has often not been a conscious choice to organise differently, but was rather done out of necessity.

Part of the reason for the arise of new or different forms of organising is because left parties and trade unions have proved to be largely ineffective in resisting neoliberalism, let alone new challenges such as the rise of extreme right wing nationalisms and even neo-fascism. But these experiments with new or different forms of organising have largely not been sustained. The mass assemblies and protest movement, which was the Arab Spring for example, was crushed by a counter-revolution throughout the Middle East. In South Africa, in the face of the labour law and state repression, the workers at struggles—such as Marikana—drifted back into a union, AMCU, despite it being as equally bad as NUM.

A problem which also plagued many of the experiments with new or different forms of organising internationally is that progressive alternative politics did not fully emerge—it existed

only amongst small sections of these movements and never became hegemonic—and neither did a counter-culture to capitalism fully emerge. This was a weakness that had consequences, including the fact that in some cases initiatives, such as the Arab Spring, could not be held together and lost momentum in the face of electoral politics and state repression.

On the other hand, when sections of the working class have drifted into parties, militancy has tended to decline—for example in Greece. While the protest movement to a degree gave birth to Syriza, once in the state power—defined by the pressures of the state’s hierarchical structure, its bureaucracy and under pressure from capital—its leadership capitulated, were co-opted and in reality abandoned their political principles. Indeed, a class that needs to desperately go beyond old ways of organising often can’t seem to escape the hangover of the past, resorting to what is known, despite the glaring limitations.

It is clear, new or different forms of organising are vital to working class resistance under the current context and given the classes’ restructuring. But there are also challenges in creating these for activists and those that wish to support them, including:

- The question of how to begin to sustain these or even should there be attempts to make such forms lasting (or are they forms that by definition only arise when there is mass struggle and hence will rise and fall with the rhythms of struggle?)
- The need to begin to bring class analysis back in to such movements and re-build progressive class politics as a force in the face of a context where it has become extremely marginalised—this too is vital even for the co-ordination of struggles in cities, let alone provincially or nationally
- The need to explore how to build a working class counter-culture in a context where it has been decimated
- The need to build and contest space for a progressive anti-capitalist politics, principles and visions that not only inform the future, but how we build movements, practice politics and conduct ourselves in the present.

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